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A SINNER'S SENTENCE

BY
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A SINNER'S SENTENCE

CHAPTER XIII.

Woodsleigh Towers.

WE are staying on here regardless of times and seasons. When I say we, I mean Blanche and I, for I am again part of her train. I am in subjugation ; I am petted—not often ; coldly criticized very frequently ; and I am very tired of it. Vera is pining to have me with her, every letter she sends, though striving to be cheerful, bemoans my absence between the lines, and I cannot leave Blanche yet awhile. The effect of Mrs. Nelson's disclosure has

barely worn off, and, sick of my servitude as I am, self-interest keeps me at her side.

The life at a country-house is wearisome to a Londoner. After the first week or so every day is monotonously alike. Were I but unattached, what guerilla warfare I could carry on amongst the women married and single ! but as I am Blanche's *cavalier servente*—and she keeps me up to my duties—my chances of amusement are small. For one thing, however, I am devoutly thankful, and that is the question of our marriage is apparently shelved for the time being. Whether I am on probation, or whether Blanche expects me to play the ardent lover sighing for his divinity, I know not ; but if it is the latter, the consummation for my part is yet a great way off.

The weather is glorious, and everything around me is propitious for the sacrifice to Hymen, but am I going to put my own neck in the noose ? Never !

Dr. Johnson for ever ! Give me a London pavement, hot and dusty though it be, after perpetual walks and grassy meads ; or give me Vera instead of Blanche, and I could be happy ! However, now and again I have a little diversion, though when indulging in it I feel guilty of a treachery to Vera that never occurs to me about Blanche.

Lisette is something more than attractive ; she is piquante, and, in addition to all the French 'nattiness on parade,' has the good point that, catch her whenever you will, from early morn to dewy eve, she always looks neat and dainty. Small wonder, then, that sometimes my thoughts stray idly from mistress to maid ; and meeting Lisette the other day in an out-of-the-way part of the house—for, like the inquisitive little wretch she is, she always has errands in the most singular places—I asked her chaffingly for a kiss.

She smiled when she saw me, but at my request her face lengthened, and she said poutingly :

‘ No, monsieur ; you think of me as nothing to ask like that.’

‘ How then, *ma chère* ?’ I replied gaily.
‘ Shall I beg it on my bended knees ?’

‘ You would not ask Mees Haviland like that.’

‘ No, indeed, I should not,’ and I burst out laughing. ‘ You are not Miss Haviland. What nonsense have you got in that dear little head now ?’

‘ Am I not as charming as she is ? Is it because she is so rich that you say “ Kiss me, Blanche dear,” as if you were saying a pater-noster ?’

‘ You are too absurd this morning. Miss Haviland is a lady, and you are—well, you are Lisette.’

‘ *Eh bien*, then go to her for your kisses,’

she replied sulkily, and tossed her head like a peacock.

More amused than offended, I answered :

‘ Kiss me, Lisette dear,’ as formally as I should have asked Blanche.

She bent forward and gave me a mocking imitation of one of Blanche’s chastest salutes, then burst out laughing and said, ‘ No. See, I will kiss you, so,’ and two soft arms were round my neck, and two soft lips pressed lovingly on mine while you could have counted ten.

I suspected Lisette, and wondered whether Blanche was in sight, so I gently disengaged myself, and said :

‘ Bravo, Lisette! you improve every day.’

She laughed and said coquettishly :

‘ Is not that better than to kiss a statue ?’

‘ Yes, ever so much,’ I replied unguardedly, for, Vera or no Vera, who could resist the witchery of this fascinating little soubrette ?

Not I at least ; the *rôle* of anchorite in his cell never had any charms for me.

What was I to do about that wretched railway label? Nothing as yet, I was not sure of my ground with this little coquette, but at all events I would make love a little further, and, by Jove! Lisette was the one to encourage me in it. She seemed very well pleased so far, and stood regarding me saucily with her head on one side.

So I proceeded :

‘Come, Lisette, that was charming ; give me another kiss.’

‘No, monsieur ; you are but playing with me. I am not a *cocotte*,’ with a most expressive shrug of her shoulders.

‘Now, Lisette, you know I am very fond of you,’ I said, taking her hand and backing my words with an eloquent look.

‘No, monsieur, *c’est une blague*. Besides, there is Alphonse who loves me, and he is

ter-r-r-r-ible,' showing her teeth viciously, 'when he is jealous.'

'Oh, bother Alphonse!' I replied; 'he isn't here now. Come!'

I tried hard to steal another kiss, but she eluded me, and said poutingly :

'No, you have your Miss Haviland, your "Blanche dear." She is so *ravissante*, so demonstrative, so warm-hearted! Bah! she is an icicle by the side of Me!'

Falling into a pose graceful and alluring as ever mythical syren, she held out her arms caressingly and invitingly. Mortal man could not resist it; but as I advanced she retreated, sending forth peal after peal of low rippling laughter.

'Lisette darling,' I said madly, my face aglow with passion, 'come to me, *I love you!*'

Still rebellious enough to give zest to the situation, she came slowly within my reach, when I seized her rapturously in my arms,

and resting her head on my breast, I rained down passionate kisses upon her upturned face. She seemed to have no objection, but presently she looked up out of one uncovered eye.

‘*Eh bien,*’ she said plaintively, ‘but you mock yourself of me.’

‘No, darling, I swear it, I love you! how can I help it, you little witch? Don’t you care for me, *chérie*?’ I added tenderly.

‘You have so many to care for you,’ she answered softly with a self-conscious diffidence as if to say, ‘I love you, but I won’t own it.’ ‘What does it matter to you?’

‘But I want you to,’ I replied, straining her closer to me, and imprinting a few more kisses, all forgetful of Vera and Blanche *e tutti quanti*. ‘I love you better than anybody!’

‘Anybody?’ she asked slyly; ‘Mees Haviland *par exemple*?’

‘Hush! you know I do,’ I said in a whisper, ‘but I mustn’t say so. Never mind about her.’

‘*Pas si bête!*’ I had released Lisette now, and she was standing by me. She continued with a disdainful gesture, ‘Pouf! it is not she that I care for.’

‘What do you mean, dear?’ I inquired tenderly.

‘It is your Miss Marchmont,’ she answered energetically; ‘you love her: I hate her, I could kill her!’

I could have laughed outright. To think of this audacious Lisette jealous of Vera. The idea was absurd, and yet after all I had given Lisette encouragement enough for anything. Confound it! I am always getting into difficulties; evidently she is going to be desperately in love with me, and here is another entanglement.

‘But what about Miss Marchmont?’ I said

innocently ; ' that is all over now. And why should it matter to you ? you don't care for me.'

You see I was between the devil and the deep blue sea, and I wanted this little spitfire's silence.

Lisette was very ready to accept my assurance about Vera, for she threw herself into my arms, exclaiming :

' Is it true, is it possible ? Then I *do* love you ! *Mon Dieu !* yes !' and she clung to me, and trembled with the strength of her own passion.

Presently she grew calmer, though she spoke impetuously.

' I am a fool ! I love you, and yet I am only Miss Haviland's maid, and yet I can love. You come and toss me money and ask for kisses, and you never think that a soubrette has a heart and can love, *ma foi !* and hate too. I do love you !' and she

pressed her lips on mine again with feverish intensity.

‘I wish she would love me a little less like a tiger-cat,’ I thought. It is the man’s *rôle* to display the greater part of the emotion, and, although it is pleasant to find your loved one showing considerable animation about her affection, still I would say with Talleyrand, ‘*Surtout point de zèle.*’ One moment Lisette is clinging to me tightly, the next she is grovelling in the prettiest attitude of despair. Her head cast down, her face covered with her hands, between which tears are streaming, and her whole frame shaken with convulsive sobs; while I am brute enough to think what an actress she would make.

‘Lisette, dear Lisette, listen to me,’ I said, trying to lift up her face. ‘I do love you.’

‘No, no,’ she cried, disengaging herself. ‘Go away. You say you love me, but you have no respect for me because I am only a

servant. I will not have your love. Go to your Blanche ; you will marry her, and yet you say you love me best.'

'But, Lisette, you know you are talking nonsense—you know I could never marry you,' I answered, trying to get back again to the region of common-sense.

'But perhaps,' she answered shyly and hesitatingly, 'perhaps—if I could bring a fortune to you. You are poor—I have heard you say so.'

'What do you mean ?' I interposed.

'Oh, nothing,' she replied mysteriously ; 'only tell me, if you became suddenly rich—rich as Miss Haviland—would you marry me ? Would you ?' she added, looking up at me bewitchingly, with all her tears dried, and a coy expression on her dainty little face.

I was very pleased at the turn things had taken, and feeling quite sure I should never

be called on to redeem that promise, I replied, laughing :

‘ I promise, with all my heart. And now, when is it to be? The sooner the better ! Come, give me another kiss to seal the compact.’

Twisting herself sinuously she escaped my grasp, and as she tripped away lightly she turned round and called out :

‘ *Non, monsieur ;* try one of Miss Haviland’s for a change.’

Then she made a little *moue* expressive of disgust, and disappeared.

And now I have finished writing I sit and think and say to myself all this is becoming a bore. I never heard of Don Juan considering too much female attention vexatious, but I really begin to think I am only a half-hearted Lothario after all. Byron’s gay hero had no compunction, no *arrière pensée*, no satiety, and here am I overwhelmed with just

a few amours. It is pleasant to be cared for and admired, if it is only by a pretty maid-servant ; but there seem to be too many pitfalls around me, and my *rôle* is not the careless butterfly one it ought to be, to my thinking. To make love indiscriminately, to fly, leaving sundry tender memories behind—‘he loves and he rides away’—are all very well in theory, but in practice you cannot break off all your attachments when they grow troublesome.

My friend Captain Beausabreur always avers that when the route comes it is just as he has produced an impression on the fair Lady Cecilia, or arranged an *entente cordiale* with naughty little Ninon Delorme, whose bewitching impudence is only equalled by her utter contempt for the value of other people’s money; and he further added :

‘No, my boy ; you get into a scrape—you want to break with some *bella donna*,

who is costing you more a year than ever your expectations from Lord Oldparr would produce if you got them fulfilled ; you have all the tribes of Judah descending on you like Egyptian flies on a dead carcase, and then see if marching orders will come to help you out. Devil a bit ! In the good old times it was different,' he grumbled on. 'Certainly, a man was gibbeted in a lot of old iron pots.'

'Vandal !' I ejaculated, as I thought of my hostess's fine collection of armour.

'Which must have been doosidly uncomfortable in hot weather,' he went on. 'But then, look at the fun he had. Then there was always some fighting, and no War Office, and no German sabres ; and a fellow could always go off to some tournament and fight for a lady's glove, and her smile, and you don't know what else, for they weren't straitlaced in those days. Any-

how, he would have a high old time among the women ; and then some fine morning he'd show up on his charger, quaff about a quart of wine at a gulp—wonder whether it was as good as this Heidsieck?—to his mistress in a most disreputable fashion so early in the day, and then clear out bag and baggage.

‘Nowadays a fellow can have a wire sent him at a country house. Yes, of course he can, and Levi and Simeon’s d——d scouts don’t know of it. Oh, of course not’—this ironically—‘and if you happen to get a little too sweet on my Lady Lovelace, her husband isn’t always the last to hear it, thanks to these infernal inventions. Mark my words, Bertie, the world is getting a blanked sight too civilized !’

I well understood Captain Beausabreur’s wrath ; for, thanks to the telegraph, his elopement with pretty Mrs. Ormerod had been stopped, and the gallant captain had come out

of the affair rather ignominiously, although, to avoid scandal, the story had been hushed up so completely that, if he had not made a confidant of me, I should never have heard of it. Naturally he was raw on the subject.

But to resume: really love-making begins to pall upon me. *Embarras de richesses* would surely weary Don Juan incarnate in time, and even he, the archetype, must have had some little consideration for the feelings of his victims. Lisette, I know, is only a servant, not to be thought of seriously for a moment; but a conviction is growing upon me that she is a factor to be reckoned with—that there is a power, a mine of love and hate lying very near the surface in her composition, and ready to break forth, as molten lava would rend the slight layer of scoria above it. *Gardez-vous, mon ami bien aimé*, that this torrent does not envelop and scorch you in its overflowing. It would be all over with Blanche, and Vera

even would shrink from me if she knew all. Why should I pain her?

And, moreover, the gossips here have had a spell of rainy weather lately, and have been whetting their tongues no doubt on my misdoings; and after Mrs. Boanerges, the revelation of Vera's circumstances, and a liaison with Lisette, would, I feel sure, necessitate my having an immediate summons back to town.

How merciful society is to the *roué*! You may hear on every hand of his evil deeds—this *esclandre* and that *faux pas*. He is so well known that on his appearance there is a slight pause, as who should say, 'Hush! here comes that dreadful Mr. Profligate!' and yet you will meet him at houses where there is more than a slight leaning to Puritanism. Otherwise irreproachable maidens and matrons will send him a card, will be seen speaking to him the while they are ten times more interested than if he were a good and blameless

man. Let us hope charitably that they wish to guide the lost sheep back again into the folds of virtue—and matrimony.

The fair sex cannot choose its own life-partners, and, with such a disproportionate ratio as exists between the sexes, a woman, to fulfil her destiny at all, if she cannot get the white sheep she covets, must consider the black sheep eligible, and trust to his reforming when the settlements are signed.

Perhaps she may even have an eye to the future, when *eau-de-vie*, Latakia, and syrens as dangerous as ever sung to Ulysses, will have done their deadly work ; and she confesses to herself with a half-sigh, because she feels wickeder than she ever thought possible, that, while she is so sorry for poor Reggie, and she could not bear to lose him, her position as a young and well-dowered widow would be by no means unendurable. Here her heart gives a guilty little flutter as she remembers—does

she ever forget him?—Eric Temple, whose looks and manner spoke ardent love to her only a few weeks ago, but who loved her too well, or was too worldly-wise, to propose, when there was no prospect but genteel beggary before them.

Take the other side of the picture, and let but a breath, a whisper, besmirch the fair fame of a woman. How greedily it is seized on, how eagerly discussed, how easily exaggerated, without a twinge of conscience to speak for the unfortunate one who has become the butt for every malicious dart! Her simplest actions are now looked on with suspicion, her motives misrepresented, and she can do nothing publicly without the scandal-mongers discovering some hidden and guilty reason for it. *Facilis descensus Averni!*

The winged and barbed arrow started on its way as carelessly as the chamois' foot rolls a handful of snow down the mountain-side, and,

like it, gathers strength and impetus, until, perchance, it strikes its victim, and overwhelms her with a cloud of mental anguish and social ruin, fitly to be compared to the destruction of an Alpine village by the avalanche. Now, *mia poverita*, if you have friends, let them stand forth; you have need of them. If you are friendless, woe be unto you! Prepare yourself for every sting that feminine malice can inflict—the stony look, the cut direct, the tacit avoidance, coldness, unkindness, rebuffs on every hand. Verily, the assemblage who wished to stone to death the woman taken in adultery must have been composed of women.

What a strange contrast it is that woman, who can and does exhibit the highest forms of kindness, patience, and devotion, is also capable of the pettiest spite, the most merciless cruelty; and when sitting in judgment on her fellow-women, jumps to a bad conclusion with a rapidity that is as illogical as it is barbarous!

CHAPTER XIV.

I AM very dense sometimes, and I wonder it never struck me before why it was that Lisette was so strangely bitter against me, that she took such an evident pleasure in discovering anything that could harm me. I thought then it was her fidelity to Blanche that led her to play the spy on me and hate me with such zest ; but no ! a very little reflection explains that all Lisette's overdone, studied hatred was really love striving to burst its bonds in her breast, and soured and embittered by jealousy of her mistress. Poor Lisette ! for she must have been more jealous still of Vera ; and no doubt she knew all about Mrs. Nelson.

Lisette is really very pretty — very pretty indeed—but only a servant. Indeed, I am weak-minded not to resent so much familiarity; but then, when a pretty girl armed *cap-à-pie* is left alone with a man, she is very apt to forget any difference in their respective positions.

Since I wrote last I have been interviewing that poor Mr. Matthew Simpson, and with what results I will confide to these pages.

He came by appointment, and I had him shown to the small sitting-room which, *en suite* with my bedroom, is not far from Blanche's apartments. I took the precaution to have a good look round to see that that artful Lisette was not likely to be eaves-dropping in the vicinity, and, when I had satisfied myself on that point, I came in and sat down facing Simpson without attempting the formality of shaking hands. It was well I did so, for, to judge from his face, dis-

appointed love was rankling in his breast ; and when I made a gesture towards an open case of cigars and cigarettes on the table, he shook his head scornfully. Quite unconcerned, I took a cigarette and lighted it, while he appeared to be boiling with impatience.

‘ Well,’ he grunted, ‘ I have come.’

‘ That is a self-evident fact that it is quite superfluous to mention,’ I rejoined.

It was perhaps too bad of me to play with him ; but I was not answerable to him for Vera, and why should I have this unpleasant business inflicted on me ? I was very charitable to bother with him at all.

‘ Have you any news for me of Vera ?’ he asked sharply.

‘ No, I have no *news* for you.’ I replied.

‘ Then you are a perjured scoundrel !’ he ejaculated shortly and sharply, like the growl of a wild beast, and, I believe, with inward

satisfaction at being convinced of my treachery.

‘Gently, my friend, gently!’ I interposed. ‘There is an Italian proverb that says, “*Che va piano—*”’

He interrupted me rudely, his temper rising fast.

‘No evasions, or I will cram your proverbs down your lying throat! What of Vera? have you nothing to tell me?’

I could not resist the temptation of pausing a moment just to watch the man’s attitude, which was very suggestive of a wild beast crouching for a spring; and then I said, in smooth tones:

‘If you will only be a little less impulsive, I will explain matters. I made you a promise when you were here last, I think?’

‘You did,’ Simpson raged. ‘You promised me a letter from Vera, assuring me she was well and happy, and you have not got it!’

Villain that you are !' he continued, clenching his teeth.

Knowing that I held the trump card, I could afford to smile, for of course I was provided with a letter from Vera. She would have written a dozen at my dictation if I had wanted them, poor little soul !

Suddenly Simpson's face changed, and he exclaimed in pitying accents :

‘ My poor little Vera, my little lamb ! where are you now ? Abandoned and forsaken, turned out into the cold world with not a roof to cover you, or a crust to eat, and no one to say a kind word to you. Have pity, sir ! Tell me at least where she is, that I may go and shelter her, and face the world and deny her shame. Do help me, sir ! Your heart cannot be so black as not to feel a little for your victim. God knows to what want and desperation may have driven her. Help me to find her, and she shall never trouble

you again, and I will bless you all my life !' .

Tears were actually running down the big fellow's face in his agony, and I would have consoled him before this if I could have checked his rapid, heart-broken torrent of words. I feel contemptible as I write this, but, *que voulez-vous?* Am I to write what I ought to have done, or the truth ?

'Mr. Simpson,' I said, affected by his emotion, 'will you not wait a minute for me to explain. I have no wish to cause you needless pain, but I was annoyed by your demeanour when you came, and I told you I had no news of Vera. I have the letter I promised you, but, as I had already assured you that she was happy and wanted for nothing, I had nothing new to tell you of her. I frankly say I am sorry to have caused you so much anxiety.'

He hardly heeded me, and gasped :

'Give it me—the letter.'

I took it up from the table where less pre-occupied people might have seen it lying, and handed it to him.

He seized it greedily, and, after covering it with breathless kisses, tore it open and devoured the contents. I ought to have been jealous and offended, but a fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind.

Of course I knew the contents of the letter ; in fact, I had had a large share in its composition.

‘ DEAR MR. SIMPSON,

‘ Mr. Clifford has told me of the interest you take in my welfare. I am writing at his request to inform you that you have not the slightest cause for uneasiness. I am well and comfortable, and happier than I ever was in my life before. You have always had my respect and esteem, and more I cannot give you, so that I beg of you to leave off thinking

about me, as it will do no good, and is only embarrassing to Mr. Clifford, who has been the very soul of kindness and consideration. He has hinted to me that you consider my position a dubious one owing to my connection with him, but you are mistaken. I have nothing to be ashamed of, and under the circumstances the course I am taking is unavoidable.

‘I should be glad to see you and convince you, but as such an interview might only raise hopes that could never be realized, I had better not let you know of my whereabouts. With my kindest regards, and once more begging you to give up all thoughts of my ever being able to reward your devotion as you wish, for it is quite impossible,

‘Believe me to remain,

‘Your sincere friend,

‘VERA MARCHMONT.’

Matthew Simpson finished his perusal of the letter, kissed it again fervently, and eyeing it as reverently as if it were the Koh-i-noor, put it away carefully in his breast-pocket. He sat some time in a brown study, and I am driven to the conclusion that he would rather have found Vera all he had pictured her in his darkest moments, provided he could have won her for his own, than discover that she was contented and happy and beyond his attainment. Really, all the selfishness is not on my part, after all.

What a curious position I was in! Another man violently in love with my wife—for Vera was practically that—and yet just the absence of that one apparently insignificant link—the marriage-tie—deprived me of the right to resent it. However, I need not have troubled myself about that aspect of the question, for I could not explain how matters stood to Simpson; and it concerned me more

to find out what his views were, and how best to put him off the scent, and send him away more or less rejoicing.

I am sure he was disappointed, for presently, drawing a deep breath, he got up, and with a sheepish, ungracious air, he said:

‘I suppose I ought to thank you; you have lifted a weight off my mind.’

‘Please yourself about that,’ I replied, piqued after my sympathy. ‘It is a matter of indifference to me.’

‘After all,’ he said, ‘I don’t know that I have so much to thank you for. Vera’s letter says so much, but tells so little, and no doubt was prompted by you.’

‘Oh, of course!’ I answered ironically. ‘Just because Miss Marchmont had the misfortune to prefer me to you, I am everything that is bad, while you endeavour to pose as a rescuing angel where none is wanted. Vera would never have been a fit

wife for you. Can't you take her advice to heart, and go home and marry someone in your own station—some strong farmer's daughter who would be some use to you, and would be to the manner born ?'

'No, I can't, Mr. Clifford, and that's a fact. I used to think I should, and I had my eye on one—a fine, strapping lass—and with a bit of money of her own too. Then I saw Miss Vera and I knew better. Look here mister,' he continued with growing excitement, 'I'm only a plain man, and I don't know how to express what I feel ; but since she went away the world seems all wrong. I'm not a fool altogether, even if I am in many things by the side of a fine gentleman like you, and I made my farm pay, and got on well for a young chap ; but I can't do it now. All my heart is gone out of the business. I've no pleasure, no pride left in anything. I can do nothing but think

of her—the one star in my dreary life—for I know now how dull and empty it is without her. And she might have been mine, too, if you hadn't come between us with your fair tales and your false speeches. I could have kept her like a lady; I would have granted her slightest wish; she should have been my idol, my queen; and then you tell me to go and marry a country girl who has been a drudge all her life, and who can't think of anything beyond what she can get for her butter and eggs, and what her pigs will weigh at Christmas! Miss Vera was so different; she was so gentle and winning; she seemed to understand your thoughts almost before you spoke them——'

'Confound it all, man!' I broke in, not a little irritated, though I felt sorry for the poor fellow, 'I don't want to hear any more of this. Don't you know Vera is my promised wife?'

‘Yes, and when,’ he replied morosely—
‘when you have got rid of some other wife,
whom I dare say you loved just as much
once. How do I know you won’t tire of
Vera in the same way, and what you may
not persuade her into before she becomes
your wife!’

‘This is too absurd!’ I answered angrily,
for it is unpleasant to be confronted with
your own misdeeds. ‘Do you think I shall
have no care for my wife’s fair fame?’

‘That’s all very fine, Mr. Clifford ; but,
country-bred as I am, I’ve seen that sad
story too often. If Vera loves you she would
consent to anything. I know she would ;
why, I’d lay down my life if she raised her
little finger, and what chance has she with
such a practised seducer as you are? Oh, if
I could only help her!’

‘Thank you,’ I said calmly, growing cooler
as he got more excited ; ‘and now, as you

have quite made up your mind that I am a thorough-paced scoundrel, there is no more to be said. I have given you all the satisfaction I can, and since you still persist in thinking Miss Marchmont is, or is going to be, my mistress, I shall be glad to terminate this interview as soon as possible.'

But no, I was not going to get rid of him so easily ; a disappointed lover is not to be pacified with a few words, charm his rival never so wisely, as I found to my annoyance.

'Don't think you're going to escape me like that. I want to know when you're going to make Vera an honest woman. When shall you be free to marry her?'

'That is a question I decline to discuss with you,' I answered haughtily. 'My private affairs have nothing to do with you, and I will brook no interference in them.'

'I thought as much,' he took me up quickly. 'I might have known Vera's letter was only

a blind ; I needn't have been deceived if I had remembered whom I was dealing with.'

' Really !' I said, involuntarily elevating my eyebrows ; ' but perhaps I might remind you that the devil is not so black as he is painted.'

' If he is as bad as you,' was the unflattering rejoinder, ' he couldn't be painted too black.'

' That is a matter of opinion,' I answered airily ; ' but if you think so, you had better go, if only to avoid contamination.'

' I'm not much of a hand at poetry,' he retorted angrily ; ' but I do remember one line that says, " A man may smile and smile, and still be a villain " ; and there you stand with your handsome false face smiling at me, and you are betraying me all the while. Ugh ! I could tear you to pieces !'

Simpson made a gesture hardly to be described, except that it gave me the idea of longing to rend me limb from limb, and his

face wore a very different aspect to its everyday apathetic look, so characteristic of the tiller of the soil.

Then he continued :

‘ I haven’t done with you yet. I have been told you are engaged to Miss Haviland, who is staying here. Are you made of flesh and blood, that you can go on deceiving people like this ? Are you a servant of the devil, sent to work all the evil that you can, that you are allowed to cause so much misery and unhappiness ?’

‘ Which I must inform you,’ I interposed, ‘ exist only in your own imagination. I tell you again that I will not have my private affairs discussed. But to show you that you are misjudging me, I may say that my engagement to Miss Haviland was broken off when Vera—when—she left the Towers.’

‘ Can I believe you ?’ he said in an unnecessarily loud voice. ‘ Can I believe any-

thing you say ? I ought to see Miss Haviland, to ask her if——’

Great heavens ! what was that ?

A gentle tap on the door, and Blanche’s clear accurate tones :

‘ Are you engaged, Bertie, or can I come in ?’

In what seemed to me the infinitesimal part of a second, I had leaned over Simpson and hissed in his ear :

‘ You fool, you infernal idiot ! Believe me or not, as you like, but breathe a word of this, and I swear I will *ruin* Vera !’

Then I resumed my ordinary tones, and, turning towards the door, I opened it, saying :

‘ Come in, Blanche, do. I am so glad to see you !’

As Blanche’s stately presence swept into the room, Simpson the broken-hearted, impassioned lover vanished, and Simpson the awkward, sheepish rustic stood revealed in

all his glory. He had risen, and was looking hot and uncomfortable, standing first on one foot and then on the other, while his hands seemed a tremendous burden to him, so difficult were they to dispose of satisfactorily. Blanche surveyed him in a comprehensive glance, that included unkempt hair, for the state of which Vera no doubt was answerable, down to boots which, though obviously his 'Sunday best,' had equally obviously trodden many a furrow. Blanche's scrutiny seemed to disconcert him all the more, for he fidgeted visibly under her gaze, and I had no fear now of any disclosures ; he was too much afraid of her, unless driven to desperation, to speak at all.

All this occupied but a few seconds, and Blanche began :

'I was passing your rooms, and fancied I heard my own name; that was my sole reason for intruding on you.'

'It was no intrusion, you know,' I said

cheerfully, and studiously avoiding any endearing term, lest Simpson's watchful ear should note it. 'Your name was mentioned; but I must explain. This is Mr. Simpson, an admirer of Miss Marchmont's.'

'Your servant, ma'am,' interrupted he, snatching at a lock of hair like a groom—I believe it was a positive relief for him to be able to do or say something—and then he blurted out: 'I love her truly, and I want to find out where she is. I would marry her to-morrow if she would have me!'

I gave him a warning glance, and then I smiled contemptuously as I thought how futile any appeal to Blanche was, as she had been given a wrong address.

She was smiling at his rough earnestness, and spoke with gracious condescension:

'Well, if Mr. Clifford cannot furnish you with her address, I have it myself somewhere, and I shall be pleased to give it you. Surely,

Bertie, you will not neglect such an opportunity for the advancement of your protégée.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' chimed in Simpson; 'thank you a thousand times, if you would be so good!'

But here I interposed:

'Unfortunately, you see, Blanche, Miss Marchmont happened to mention to me before she left, that while her respect for Mr. Simpson was unbounded, she wished to discourage his advances. So she begged me, if I heard of anyone making inquiries, not to give her address. That is all.'

Poor Simpson! he did look crestfallen: the prize was so nearly in his grasp, as he thought.

'You knew of this?' Blanche said interrogatively, turning to him.

'Yes,' he assented unwillingly.

My eye was upon him with a good deal of meaning in it.

'Of course,' Blanche went on judicially, 'it

is for Miss Marchmont to decide, and really, Mr.—er—Simpson, if I may presume to offer my advice, I think it very unwise of you to try and force your suit upon her if she is unwilling. She no doubt knows her own mind, and in these days when it is almost every girl's ambition (and especially those in a dependent position) to get married, you may be quite sure she has very good reasons for declining your advances. I cannot expect you to understand *our* feelings.' Simpson might have been a savage, so imperially did she speak. 'But I can assure you that the persecution of any right-minded girl with attentions she did not approve of would infallibly turn any favourable opinions she had of you into cordial detestation.'

Simpson gave vent to some inarticulate sound like a smothered groan. I really pitied him, hearing, as it were, his sentence pro-

nounced in such chilling, measured syllables. Blanche went out of the room as if she were a queen leaving the throne and gathering her robes about her.

Simpson looked up with a gloomy, dangerous expression, like a wounded animal brought to bay, and then said in concentrated, sullen tones :

‘Curse you ! It was only the thought of Vera that restrained me from telling Miss Haviland everything. I must think of Vera’s welfare before everything, or your villainy should be known through Woodsleigh. I am going now, but, mark you, if ever I find you have betrayed her, I will kill you as I would shoot a mad bull, and think I had done a good action !’

He flung out of the room, unconsciously tragic ; but the dignity of his exit was sorely spoilt by his having to ask the way twice,

and at last having to be ignominiously conducted to the front door by a big flunkey, in whose presence he could not shake off the dust from his shoes, supposing he had a mind to.

CHAPTER XV.

I WAS bemoaning my hard fate the other day, because I was embarrassed by Lisette's attentions. Now I have faced the disappointed lover, the melodramatic hero who has threatened conditionally to kill me, I feel the better for the encounter. Opposition, anything to contend with, a danger or difficulty to avert or surmount, are fine tonics for the mind, and brace up all one's mental faculties. I am inclined to think her Majesty's Government after a hard session, during which they have been harried with questions which have taken all their skill of fence to parry, must be in a state of high

mental training, and fit for anything, from the practice of diplomacy in holy Russia to the differential calculus.

To face Blanche, although she is a hundred times cleverer than poor Simpson, seems comparatively easy ; for he went straight to the point with brutal bluntness, and had no compunction about letting me know when he thought I was not telling the truth ; while I can fence with her with a thousand polite evasions, and she is too proud to exhibit a vulgar curiosity. We continue on the same terms, and that cold, searching eye still keeps me in subjection, for it is wonderful what an influence some people's opinion has upon you, no matter how determined you are to brave and defy it.

It is a truce, but an armed one, that exists between us, and I am still, as it were, under surveillance ; while any little endearments that I may throw as crumbs, if Blanche's

dignity will not allow her to snap them up, at least I flatter myself are not unwelcome. This state of things is nearly as bad as bondage, after all. There is still so much understood attachment between us, that to flirt with other people is out of the question ; and when I meet Lisette, and she telegraphs me a message of love with her saucy eyes, I have an uneasy feeling as to whether Blanche or anyone else may notice it.

I have need of some stimulus—some mental tonic. I have had a letter from poor little Vera, confiding to me a sea of troubles. She is a strong-minded little woman too, and would not bother me with them until they grew unendurable. As a rule, I keep my own troubles to myself and this diary—it is considerably safer ; and I often find myself selfishly wishing others would do the same.

Vera's is a sad letter ; she evidently feels her position keenly, and she has been made to

do so by a lot of busybodies whose necks I should like to wring. However, I must go to Edenford at once, and take her away—that is evident. The letter may well appear here ; it tells the story more eloquently and forcibly than any words of mine can :

‘ Woodbine Cottage, Edenford.

‘ MY OWN DARLING BERTIE,

‘ My love, my dearest, I am so lonely without you, and I am pining for a sight of your own dear face. I am quite well, as you always insist on my telling you that first of all.

‘ Now, Bertie dear, I do hope you won’t be angry with me for worrying you with my troubles ; but I want you to be the good, kind darling you have always been to your little Vera, as you call me, and take me away from here. Don’t think, I beg of you, that I am dissatisfied or discontented without reason

after all your goodness, for I am sorry to have to cause you a moment's vexation, and I have struggled against being jealous of Blanche.

‘ Since you left here last, and I have counted every day that has separated me from my dear one, my life has been growing insupportable. I have concealed it from you in my letters, for I have tried—oh, so hard !—to live down the annoyances, but in vain, for they have only grown worse and worse.

‘ It began like this : Mr. Thompson, the clergyman, called, and as you advised me, I was very cool and guarded with him in everything I said. He was a horrid underbred man, and appeared to think his coming a piece of condescension. When I kept him at a distance, he seemed to take umbrage, and his enquiries, delivered in a pompous manner, grew all the more pointed, as if I were a pariah and had no business in the village. I thought nothing of this, for I did not want to make

any friends, and I was quite content to live on in the hope of soon seeing you again. But I was soon unpleasantly reminded of the subject again, for Mrs. Empson, the landlady, was continually trying to get up a conversation and pump me. Repellant as I was, she was not to be shaken off, for she is an indefatigable talker, and would keep up the conversation all to herself, interspersed with remarks such as, "Well, I hope, ma'am, you had a happier wedding than I did, and where did you say it was?" I could not be altogether reticent, lest she should grow suspicious, and, dear, I had to describe our marriage as a very quiet one, and having taken place in London.

' Soon I became painfully aware that gossip about me was afloat. I could see on entering and leaving church, with that peculiar intuition which you have so often remarked that only women possess, that I was being looked at askance. Looks that were meant to freeze me

were showered on me, skirts were drawn aside as I passed, and I could feel I was being shunned, and that I was intended to feel it.

‘Don’t think, dearest, that these were idle fancies. I have not been so used to a luxurious existence that a crumpled rose-leaf in my daily lot would disturb me. Events soon proved that my apprehensions were only too well founded. Mrs. Thompson called on me one afternoon, and though she was only plain and homely in her manner, she was kindness personified. She talked to me so pleasantly, and urged me so kindly to be frank with her, that I could have confided anything to her except our story. Oh, Bertie darling, my own ! I won’t grieve you by repining ; but if only things were different, and I was really your wife, how happy I should be ! I am happy and content as it is, but you are so kind and sympathetic you can

easily understand what a burden our secret is to me.

‘Mrs. Thompson said to me, “Well, my dear, I am truly sorry for your own sake that you can’t tell me everything; but I believe you have some good reason for keeping your secret. I love you, my dear, if I may say so on so short an acquaintance, and I feel for you as if you were my own child, for you know we have none. I believe in you, and I will stand up for you, whatever people may say or think. They shall never make me believe you are anything but the good, innocent girl I take you for.” And then she kissed me so tenderly that, Bertie dear, I was cut to the heart, and I burst out crying. She soothed me so gently that I felt like a criminal, and oh, dearest, was it wrong of me? but I sobbed out an incoherent story that you had married me secretly in opposition to your father’s wishes, and if it became

known, it would ruin all your prospects. She was contented with this, and went away saying I could always count on her as a friend.

‘ But this was not all. Mr. Thompson came again, and made many solemn speeches, that it behoved us to judge no one, and not to think ill of our neighbours ; yet there came a time when mercy must be tempered with justice, and the transgressor must be shown the evil of his ways, lest his example became a stumbling-block to his weaker fellows. Then he came to the point, and, with more tact and *savoir faire* than I should have given him credit for, pointed out that your short visits at long intervals, my quiet, retired way of living, and the strict silence I preserved about myself and you, had all combined to render me an object of distrust amongst his “ peaceful and united little flock ” ; and that he would candidly and in all Christian charity

advise me to acquaint him as an erring fellow-mortal, who was always ready to receive the sinner's confession, with as much of my story as could be most conveniently disclosed ; or, he went on, as I made no sign of acquiescence, as his parishioners considered my presence amongst them in the light of a scandal, that he would most heartily advise me to remove elsewhere, for he sincerely thought that I should find a prolonged residence at Edenford painful to me. Here, I need not say, I thoroughly agreed with him.

“ “ You see,” he said, “ my dear Mrs. Dacre, although it is my mission to succour and comfort the erring one, my congregation will not see things in the same light, in spite of all the sermons I have preached them ; and were you to continue living here, and your attendance at St. Andrew's, I sadly fear that many of them, judging you innocently no doubt, would refuse to attend my poor efforts

at the church, thinking, and you must admit with reason, that your continual presence is an obstacle to, and a distraction from, their worshipping properly. Pharisaical they may be, but it has always been so since the days when the Pharisee held himself sternly aloof from the publican. Take my advice, and accept one alternative or the other. I am truly sorry for you, and I counsel you for your own good, either to disclose your story to me or to leave Edenford, where your life, under its present conditions, can only be painful to you, and a source of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness to the rest of my flock."

'My troubles do not end here, unfortunately. Mrs. Empson, the landlady, came to me to-day, and with many apologies and profuse talk, in which she referred to her having always "kept her house respectable," went on to say that I caused so much talk

in Edenford, and she would be very glad, if it wasn't inconveniencing me, if I would suit myself with some other rooms. She said she never wanted "no better lodger," but she had her living to make ; and she was afraid she might lose the Hall, and Mrs. White and Mrs. Brown's washing, if she went against them, and she couldn't afford to do that, as they were very good to her, and were "never particular about a bit of cold victuals, or owt like that."

'There, Bertie love, is the whole of my sad story, and I am sorry to have had to inflict it on you, but I could not bear you to think I was complaining without a cause ; and I was bound to tell you, for I must leave Edenford. I don't suppose anyone else would take me in. I shall be homeless soon, and I wonder sometimes, though I have the most perfect confidence in you, whether it is a foreshadowing of what I shall have to bear

with as a punishment for my sin in loving you, darling one, only too well ; but if I can retain your affection, I can endure everything cheerfully, but without that my life would be the blackest despair.

‘ You will come to me soon now, my own, my all but husband—I have bitter need of you.

‘ Your own

‘ VERA.’

She tells her story only too well, and a vivid picture of the scenes comes into my mind. Poor, brave little Vera! She endures the separation without complaining ; she thinks only of me ; she bears with everything until she is literally driven to me for assistance ; she displays a fortitude that under other circumstances would be deemed heroic ; she really deserves a better fate. Would that I could afford to make her happy !

There is a self-denying nobility about Vera which women rarely display, and yet, because of her sin, judged by the world's standard, she is everything that is bad. Were she to exhibit the pluck and resignation of a martyr, the goodness of an angel, the bravery of a Grace Darling or the self-sacrifice of a Florence Nightingale, it would avail her nothing. Could I paint her as surpassing the whole world in womanly achievements, that one blot upon her escutcheon would never be forgiven her or forgotten, even in her greatest moments of heroism. In fact, I fancy I see maids and matrons turning up their noses in disgust at my eulogy of this improper character.

A great wave of indignation rises in my breast when I think of Vera. Not at my own sin—oh no! Don Juan is not the man to be indignant at his own most promising amour—but at the treatment she has received.

Man, the sinner, the tempter, goes scot-free !

I was in court one day when a poor girl was being tried for murder arising out of concealment of birth. Driven to desperation by the fear of discovery, she had resorted to this expedient, and there were circumstances about the case which brought the graver charge perilously near being proved; so much so that, when the verdict against her was only on the minor charge of concealment, the judge thought it right to inflict the maximum punishment fixed by statute, viz., two years' imprisonment with hard labour. Before doing so, however, he referred in scathing terms to the man, the author of all this misery, who had basely deserted the girl in her hour of need. His language was trenchant and stinging ; indeed, he regretted with more vehemence than is usually displayed on the bench that the law could not

touch the father; and I feel sure that if he had been *en évidence* his life would not have been safe from the excited popular feeling.

But that is only a solitary case. Generally the sinner goes amongst his fellow-men, and is often rallied on his adventures by the more hardened spirits; but what of the poor girl? She can never hold up her head again; she is without the pale, and shunned as if she were a leper. It is unfair, unjust, unequal. Ladies have had the courage to establish institutions for their fallen sisters who have sunk to the deepest depths of degradation, and who care little about their position, and value less the efforts made to reclaim them; but let a respectable girl go wrong, and how many helping hands are held out to her, how many will try to make her forget her shame? So few—and yet who needs help the worst?

Christian charity! How much has been said and written about it, and how little it is

practised in these instances where keenest need should surely be the qualification for assistance! Far be it from me to suggest that immorality should be encouraged or made light of; but I will say that those chaste and virtuous gorgons, who haply have never been tempted themselves, and yet are so ready to condemn their fallen sisters, should take into account that man is strong and woman weak; and that woman only yields to temptation in the last extremity. Man, the tempter, the greater sinner, has no punishment; woman, the weak, the victim, has all the pain and anxiety, and all the punishment. Let the man bear, or at least share, the disgrace, the obloquy that the woman suffers. He is essentially a selfish animal; make him feel the shame and reproach, and you shall do more to cure immorality than all the would-be philanthropic fads of crotcheteers will accomplish in æons of years.

CHAPTER XVI.

Lambton-le-Marsh.

I OPEN my diary to confide to it that I am by the sea with darling little Vera. I am reveling in ozone and caresses : the former counteracts the latter, which are delicious but enervating. No marooned sailor ever saw a strange sail on the horizon with more delight than Vera welcomed me with at Edenford. At all events, I passed for husband ; and she clung to my arm and nestled close up to me with such a pretty little trusting air that my blasé old heart went out to her. It is very sweet to have a tender, loving girl to meet you, who is frantically delighted to see

you, and whose naïve, frank companionship is an exquisite change from the stiff artificiality of Blanche and Woodleigh Towers.

Vera is a sensible little woman, but how could she help a childish delight because Nature has endowed me with a fierce frown when I like to use it? and I did use it lavishly when we encountered any of her detractors at Edenford.

Bills were paid, and after several very uncomplimentary remarks on my part about the place and the people to Mrs. Empson, who I knew was the one of all others to let the whole village know my opinion of them, we departed bag and baggage ostensibly to town.

Before leaving we had consulted the plain business-like map that Bradshaw provides, possibly as a relief after the weary mysticism of columns of figures that begin in Scotland and end at Moorgate Street, or reach from

Willesden Junction to Brighton. They never by any chance fit in with where you want to go, and they are now and again interspersed with mysterious *a*'s and *b*'s, of which I have a particular horror. I have hunted out routes laboriously, ignoring these letters, until at last they have forced themselves upon my attention, and then I have looked up some casual *a* or *b*, only to find *a* Saturdays only, or *b* Mondays only, or some day when it was out of the question for me to travel.

Well, after much study of the map, and pros and cons concerning this place and the other, our labours interrupted by pleasant dalliance like two lovers planning their honeymoon, we pitched on Lambton-le-Marsh. I knew something of it some years ago, but it has since grown ambitious in a small way, and is aping some of the pretensions of far superior watering-places. For instance, its inhabitants, backed by some land speculators,

have now christened it Lambton-on-Sea ; but on the whole they are an unassuming, respectable, hard-working community, and civil and obliging to the last degree. Their earnings are anything but large, and even when their harvest of visitors does come from the surrounding towns, they do not exhibit the rapacity and extortion so often found at other places.

There is a High Street, and had the ambition of the speculators I mentioned before been realized, there would be several noble streets surrounding a park ; but unfortunately the 'choice' and 'eligible' and 'conveniently situated' building plots did not go off with the rapidity that was expected, and at present there looks every possibility of their being given over again to the plough. Providentially there is a railway-station, and a fair amount of communication with the outside world.

Vera promises me to be very happy here, and so, letting the morrow take thought for the things of itself, we yield ourselves up to the enjoyment of to-day with all the relish that a long separation has given us. There is just as much amusement as you care to make for yourself. If you wish to be idle, there is no place more suitable : you can recline under green foliage, there are soft sands which adapt themselves to your position, and woo you to gentle slumber, while your head nods over the last polemical disquisition on agnosticism or other abstruse subject, which nowadays goes by the name of a novel, or you can put off in a boat, anchor, and lie there, gently tossed by every passing billow, and then the charms of Morpheus are unusually irresistible, aided by the soft lullaby of the breaking waves.

Have you a taste for activity ? There are charming walks and pretty scenery all round, with sea-breezes borne from the bosom of the

ocean to permeate you, to drive away the very thoughts of past dissipation, and make you sigh for perpetual Arcadia ; you can take a turn at fishing, and give a hand with the trawl-warp that hauls in the net with its silvery contents, all glistening in the morning sun, and toothsome beyond description when you have helped to catch them. You can drive, or you can be master of a craft of your own, and scud through the waves with one hand on the tiller and the other grasping the sheet, while, to add to my enjoyment, I have a little smiling face looking up at me wonderingly to see how brave and strong and clever I am.

Flâneur as I am, I love the contrast. The healthy, simple life is full of charms to anyone satiated with the distractions of London. Here I look back with dislike upon many saturnalia I have assisted at and professed to enjoy, and my thoughts wander idly to that

sage who remarked that life would be tolerable but for its amusements. And there is much pleasure in giving pleasure to others. Vera accompanies me everywhere with a dog-like, unobtrusive devotion, sharing my pursuits contentedly, her face aglow with happiness at having me with her.

If things had only been different, if the Fates had only been propitious, and I had been Vera's husband! I often think regretfully—and yet how long would the dream have lasted? Who can say? And Clifford *v.* Clifford and Anonyma might have provided another spicy dish for the breakfast-table. Nothing is so uncertain, so fleeting, as happiness. Treasure it carefully, tenderly as you will, the frail plant often droops and fades, smothered perhaps by too much solicitude; and the human mind is so complex that it is impossible to formulate conditions for the existence and continuance of earthly happi-

ness, that much sought-after possession, which we take as a matter of course while it is with us, and whose absence we feel so keenly.

Vera and I talk endlessly, and though there is nothing to look forward to, we build castles in the air like a couple of children. We defer to one another's wishes, and even have playful little quarrels, each of us insisting that the other shall have his or her way. We are an example to many and many a married couple. Black Care has not peeped over my shoulder at all, until one day when we were sitting in a boat by ourselves, I leaning back lazily and half inclined to sleep, Vera said to me :

‘ Will you bear with me, Bertie dearest, for a little while, if I talk seriously ?’

‘ Certainly, dear,’ I answered, all unsuspecting, for I had never failed in what I conceived to be my duty to her, and twinges

of conscience as to what she might feel were hardly in my line.

‘Darling, you have been everything that is kind to me ; my life is one that many people might well envy—very different indeed from the usual fate of women who have sinned as I have ; but really, Bertie, though I value your love above everything—it is all I have now—I would go back cheerfully to my former loveless existence, I would give everything to be—to be as I was before.’

‘Nonsense, dear,’ I answered affectionately ; ‘don’t say that ; it grieves me. Have I neglected to do my best in anything to make you happy ?’

‘No, my love,’ she replied with emphasis, and squeezing my hand, ‘not in anything. It was not that I was thinking of for a moment. But sin does bring its own punishment ; I feel it here,’ she went on, touching her breast. ‘To be able to look the whole world in the

face seemed a small thing when weighed against your love, but to have to carry your secret locked in your heart, and to realize that you are an outlaw from everyone you knew, are burdens that you cannot cast off lightly. The mere performance of the marriage rite seems a trifle ; but, oh, Bertie! the consequences of it are everything. No unsanctified union can ever be a happy one.'

'Don't trouble your dear little head, Vera, with the ethics of the question. Who can say that a mere custom which has united thousands of unhappy and ill-assorted mortals can have any influence on their future ?'

'But it has,' she answered vehemently, 'and that is what I want to impress on you. I have often heard you talk lightly and carelessly of the marriage tie. Promise me, darling, never to do so again. You are not bound to me in any way ; you may persuade other girls to take the same fatal step as I

have done, although as long as you care for me you won't. Promise me, dearest, now, while you love me, that you won't speak slightingly of the Church's blessing, and that you will not beguile anyone else into danger. I have suffered bitterly for my sin ; let me make all the atonement I can by trying to save someone else from the misery of such a fate.'

'But, Vera darling,' I interposed, 'I have heard nothing of this before. I hoped and trusted you were happy.'

'I am, dearest, as far as anything short of marriage can make me. Don't think I am going to try and persuade you into that. When I came to you, I came with my eyes open ; I had counted the cost, and I was prepared to risk even greater things for your love than I did. But it is impossible to judge calmly, to realize everything you stake on that one cast of the die ; a woman has but

one possession—her honour, a jewel to be prized above everything ; and when that is lost she has lost everything worth living for. No amount of kindness, wealth, or anything the world can give her, can replace it, or raise again her fallen self-respect. Would that I could go on a crusade from place to place, warning women, until my lips refused to speak, of the dangers of yielding to temptation !’

I tried to interpose, but she went on hurriedly and impatiently :

‘ Yes, dear, I know what you would say. While you are here, you are my sunshine, you are the very breath of life to me ; but when you are gone, I suffer hours and hours of poignant agony. The tortures of distrust, the consciousness that I am an outcast, that I am not fit to associate with other women, that even yon poor creature gathering wood on the shore would look down on me—all these

reflections are infinitely painful beyond description. Oh, women ! if I could but tell you the anguish, the wretchedness, the misery, you would have to suffer, no kisses, no sophistries, no entreaties, would tempt you from the path of virtue !

‘ Don’t you think, Vera dear, you are rather piling on the agony ?’ I inquired meekly, anxious to check this flood of eloquence, which was too melodramatic to suit me.

‘ No, hear me out,’ she persisted. ‘ Do you think anything can compensate a woman for the loss of her peace of mind ? I know better. A man has distractions and pleasures to keep him from thinking ; a woman has long lonely hours of despair, each succeeding one growing more painful than the last. Many a time I have braved the scornful looks and pointed insults at Edenford to get away from my own thoughts, while my conscience kept on urging with a wearying repetition, “ You

were an honest woman once ; what are you now ?” ’

I could have said something sarcastic about qualifications for the Salvation Army, but I did not wish to wound her. I had been half tempted to marry her once ; what an escape I had ! She might have had these attacks all the same. Still, I must dissemble, for I loved her, and I was deeply sorry to hear of her unhappiness.

‘ Vera darling, it grieves me beyond description to hear you talk like this. Is there nothing I can do to make your life happier ?’

‘ But one thing—to marry me,’ she answered, with a faint smile ; ‘ and that, ardently as I desire it, I will not ask of you. I sinned with a knowledge of the consequences, and I must bear my punishment. Don’t pity me ; think of some poor wretches who are abandoned by their deceivers, even left in want ! My lot

must be paradise compared to the hell they have to endure.'

Vera grew calmer as she spoke, and seemed relieved at having unburdened herself.

I said nothing, and she continued :

'Forgive me this outburst, I feel so strongly for others, for I know if they could but foresee a tithe of the mental torment that one fatal step entails upon them, they would be warned in time, and avoid and withstand temptation as if it was a deadly serpent. I am happy again in having no prospect of any children so far to learn their mother's shame—everything is in my favour—and yet I could often hurl myself off the nearest precipice, if I were only sure of the welfare of my soul. Women should never be deceived ; the path that looks strewn with roses is covered with thorns and tortures more subtle than ever the Inquisition devised ; and worse, for there is no hope, nothing but the blackest despair to look

forward to. The victim is ready, the trap is set and baited so alluringly. Rather should it be superscribed "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!"'

I was carried away by her eagerness, and, holding out my hand, I exclaimed :

'Vera, you are right ; and here under the blue heaven I promise you solemnly that never shall any woman be led into temptation by me again !'

'So help you God,' she added, taking my hand and looking upwards wistfully and reverently.

'So help me God,' I repeated after her, slowly and with deep feeling.

We did not speak for some moments, and I fancied her lips moved as if in silent prayer. Presently she said :

'My dear Bertie, let us look at things calmly again. Do not imagine because I have opened my heart to you that I am com-

plaining or blaming you for my unhappiness. You were candid enough with me at Woodsleigh ; it was a business-like arrangement '—here she smiled sorrowfully. ' You have provided for my wants liberally, and have fulfilled your compact to the letter and beyond it ; while I on my part undertook to render you the affection and the services of a wife, and I understand resignation and cheerfulness to be amongst them. You have your standard of goodness to live up to, no doubt, and that I will say nothing about, so we will drop the subject after just one more point I want to mention. To make atonement for my wickedness, I ought never to see you again, and I ought to give up the income you so generously settled upon me, for it is the wages of sin ; but, Bertie *darling*, I cannot—I *cannot* do the former. The ineffably happy moments I enjoy by your side stand out by contrast with my dreary, wretched hours alone like brilliant

stars in an ink-black sky, and I am not penitent enough yet to deprive myself of the only happiness I have—the price for which I sinned ; and you belong to no one else, or my guilt would be too great to bear. Of your money I spend only enough to supply myself with necessaries, and the rest I use in charity where I think it does good. Tell me, can I do more than that to lift the burden from my conscience ? I am only human, and I can no more help clinging to you than the heathen to his idol. You are my divinity—nay, my very life !

Touched by her earnestness, I replied gravely and gently :

‘I, the tempter, the actual cause of your sin, am no fit confessor for you, dearest Vera ; but I would remind you that “unto him that hath sinned much, much shall be forgiven.” Repentance such as yours cannot be without forgiveness, and we have no injunction to

immure ourselves in religious houses nowadays, which seems to me to be the only alternative, as I fear it is not given to all women to emulate Mrs. Fry or Lady Strangford. I will not attempt to console you, feeling your position as deeply as you do, with conventional casuistries ; and though I ought to be the last to turn you from any good resolves you may have formed, I would say, take a rational view of things, and own that there are far greater sinners than yourself ; and my humble opinion is that you have been adequately punished for the wrong you have committed.'

After all Vera's moving eloquence I ought to have yielded at once, and proffered her marriage ; but if I am not altogether bad, I am anything but good, and heroics seldom affect me except in my risible faculties.

With these and similar platitudes I comforted her, until she had almost regained her

natural spirits and vivacity. Poor little woman! who would have thought she would have taken such a comparatively venial offence so much to heart?

It will be a decided bore if Vera is going to continue in this strain; I should not have stood it so well if I did not love her dearly. Here am I already making rash promises. By Jove! if I go on like this I shall end by teaching in a Sunday-school. But Vera can be tremendously tragic when she tries, and I suppose it impressed me because I know she is sincere.

When Wilson Barrett and Terriss rant, I have to try my hardest not to laugh, unless I know beforehand what is coming, and take the precaution to go out and 'see a man' what time the pathetic and heroic taps are turned on; and the ladies in the stalls and dress-circle think what a darling the actor is, while the gods to a man shriek and

roar and stamp their approval, and then, as some fellow said, go home and kick their wives. Let us pray for a little less fine sentiment, and a little more practice of the virtues we profess to adore on the stage.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lambton-le-Marsh.

THE time slips on here like a happy dream. If life were only all summer with Vera! and yet, no doubt, it is just the very consciousness that my stay must come to an end soon that lends it a greater charm. Vera clings to me with an intense yearning that augurs badly for our parting, which is drawing near, as I must be getting back to Woodsleigh, for Blanche is leaving there before long, and has made me promise to return before she takes her departure.

My serenity has been disturbed twice. High Street, Lambton, is not exactly West-

bourne Grove, or the Rue de la Paix ; so when I wanted to buy Vera some superfluities in the way of dress and other things, I took her to Marshford, the little market-town nearest to us. We spent a pleasant day there, and I waited patiently while piles of boxes were taken down and opened to show their contents, and endless yards of material unrolled. It was such a pleasure to watch Vera's bright little face sparkling with delight as I insisted on her purchasing this and that and the other, for after her hard youth it was a new and gratifying occupation for her, in spite of her moralizing fits ; and is there a daughter of Eve in existence, I wonder, even in a convent, who has not the feminine instinct for beautifying herself, no matter how much circumstances and she may have tried to crush it down ?

It is more blessed to give than to receive, especially if you have a grateful recipient, and

I am tempted into what Vera considers reckless extravagance, altogether regardless of the fact that on my writing-table at Woodsleigh there is a polite note from Cabana and Co., regretting that 'we do not feel justified in sending the cigars you ordered, as your account has been running so long,' etc. This, too, is the politest of a whole sheaf, the gamut of the others ranging from 'earnestly and respectfully beg for a settlement, as we have a large amount to make up,' etc., to 'Messrs. Smith and Co. beg to inform Mr. Clifford that unless his account is settled before the end of the month proceedings will be taken to enforce payment,' *tout court*. These might worry some people, but it is a real blessing to have a disposition that is not upset about trifles.

Concluding our purchases, after a little lunch, and a pint of moselle that made Vera chatter like a dear little magpie, we made

our way to the station, which, by a special dispensation of Providence for the benefit of the local flymen, is situated nearly a mile from the town. It is a junction for two or three little places that no one ever heard of, and no one in their senses could ever by any possibility want to go to, and as it was market-day there was a feeble sort of animation and bustle prevailing.

So far from Woodsleigh as we were, I had not the slightest fear of anyone seeing us together, or even recognising me at all; but Vera's sharp eyes were on the watch, and she touched my arm and spoke hurriedly:

‘Look, Bertie, do look! isn't that like Lisette?’

I turned, and surely it was Lisette disappearing round a corner arrayed in deep mourning, with a heavy black veil almost concealing her features. I could not be mistaken in the contour of that *svelte* but well-

rounded figure, and that pretty little waist—I had had my arm round it too often—but I did not impart this interesting information to Vera.

‘Hurry, dear,’ I answered quickly, ‘round that way, and I will go the other. We ought to make sure.’

It was no use: when we met again after some minutes’ search, there was nothing for it but to own that Lisette had effaced herself completely and vanished from the scene like a clown through a trap. This made me all the more uneasy, as it convinced me it was she, and that she had seen us.

How in the name of goodness had she discovered we were at Lambton, which was as out-of-the-way a spot as you could find in the three kingdoms, and was practically unknown to everybody except the residents in the small towns near, and a few day-trippers from the Black Country, who tradition says were

once beguiled down by an excursion? These, so the tale goes, took one comprehensive glance at the place, walked down to the shore—the sea was about a mile out—returned to the Lambton Arms, where the consumption of gin was something alarming, and then marched in a body to the railway-station, and demanded to be taken back home at once, a request with which the station-master, wise in his generation considering the desperate-looking characters he had to deal with, at once complied.

It was impossible that Lisette could have discovered our present address at Edenford. I did not know it myself, and even if I had, it would have been the very last thing I should have dreamt of mentioning. She must have followed me there, and then ‘shadowed’ us all the way to Lambton, and yet that sounds improbable, for why should she have come a second time? What a

detective she would make! and we, all unsuspecting, must have been watched in a way that would have done no discredit to Fouché and his myrmidons.

What can Lisette's little game be? She vowed she loved me, and said something ridiculous—what was it?—about my marrying her. How absurd it sounds, my fallen fortunes attached to that berouged little coquette! What can her motive be, except that she is jealous of Vera, and wants to find some means of separating us?—a pretty hard task to accomplish. Vera has given up everything for me; she will not listen to any *intrigante*, and *pour moi*, forewarned is forearmed.

I had told her of my estrangement from Blanche, though I was careful to conceal the cause of it; but after encountering Lisette, Vera seemed ill at ease, and the next day she told me the reason of her anxiety.

‘Bertie dearest,’ she said, ‘what could Lisette have wanted down here? She is a horrid girl—so inquisitive and fast; I thoroughly detest her.’

‘That is just the question that has been puzzling my brains, if I have any,’ I replied; ‘perhaps, on the old principle of two heads being better than one, we can help one another to solve the mystery.’

‘You know you told me you had almost broken off your engagement with Miss Haviland. Is she anxious not to lose you, and has sent that creature to see what you are doing, and if there is any prospect of winning you back again?’

‘But I owe Blanche less allegiance now, and she may send fifty Lisettes if she chooses.’

‘Oh, but, darling,’ Vera answered anxiously, ‘I don’t want her to know I am here passing as your wife. What would she think of me?’

‘Think, dear one?’ I replied lightly: ‘she

would think how happy she would be to change places with you, for I am sure she is in love with me yet.'

'How she would hate me, if she knew all! She had your affection once.'

'Yes,' I drawled hesitatingly, 'to a certain extent; but not like you have. She was not a woman—I can't call her a girl, I don't believe she ever was one—to exhibit much emotion to. I never attempted to be demonstrative with her—you must have seen that for yourself; she would have thought it was vulgar. It would have been purely a *mariage de convenance* on my side.'

'And now you are not sure of marrying her, what are you going to do? Oh, darling, if you would only work at your profession, and I could be truly your wife, what a heaven of happiness it would be!'

'Tempered, Vera love, I sadly fear, by at least six children and bitter struggles with

poverty. Your dear face pinched and sharpened by want and anxiety, while I should be wretched and irritable about rent and taxes and housekeeping !'

She gave a little sigh, and then continued :

' You always said, dear, you were in difficulties ; have you got over them ? They never seem to trouble you.'

' My darling Vera, I have always been in difficulties, since I can remember. If I had a thousand a year, I have no doubt I should spend three.'

She looked surprised, and said :

' But I should never know you were embarrassed ; you are always kind and light-hearted, and have a smile for me.'

' Why not, *petite* ?' I answered. ' It would make my debts no less if I told you the sum total—which, by the way, I don't know myself—and only make you uneasy. As long as the Jews and others think I am going to

marry Blanche Haviland, things are all right, and that is why I can't afford to fall out with her definitely and finally.'

'Then you mean to marry her sooner or later?' demanded Vera with a sadly disappointed look. 'I did hope it was all over between you.'

This was not pleasant to face ; but I did my best, feeling very despicable. But, after all, it was no new thing, no broken faith on my part.

'You should not ask me such questions, dearest ; they can only be painful for me to answer and you to hear the response. At the present moment there is no likelihood of my doing so at all ; but for me to assure you that it never would happen would be insincere and unwise on my part, and might raise hopes that will never be realized. Rest satisfied, dear child, that you have my undivided love ; more than that I cannot give you.

Why raise the point ? I can give you but the one reply.'

'True,' she answered sadly, 'I cannot complain ; but it is woman-like to go on hoping against hope, and the news of your rupture with Miss Haviland filled me with joy. Next to the loss of my self-respect, the thoughts of her are the bitterest drop in my cup of sorrow. I picture you by her side, lavishing caresses and endearments upon her, that I cannot resent or even blame you for, and my heart beats with a fierce jealousy that goes near to strangle me, when I reflect on my own impotence. I try to be calm, and reason with myself that it must be so ; but it is useless. Love and passion and jealousy cannot be argued with, cannot be bound down by logic, cannot be controlled by mere determination of will !'

'I can realize all you say, and I feel sorry, very sorry for you ; but of what use is it to

regret?—we have taken the step and cannot draw back now; and, Vera, my affairs are so desperate that the only possible way out of them is to marry Blanche. It is unpleasant to have to remind you, dear, but, you know, it was our understanding from the first.'

'Could you not work, and pay off your debts honourably, without having recourse to that hateful expedient?' asked Vera earnestly.

'My dear girl, all my brains could ever earn would be the merest drop in the ocean, and to have held out as long as I have done, a man must stick at nothing. I owe thousands for which I have only had hundreds, I have signed bills and promissory notes without even looking at them, and a crash sooner or later is inevitable——unless I marry Blanche.'

'Does she know all this?'

'Of course, Vera. You could hardly think me capable of marrying her under false pretences. It is degrading, I must own, for

a man to be bought, although women think nothing of it ; but, after all, Blanche is a *parti* anyone might be proud of. Besides, what are overwhelming liabilities to me are a trifle to her.'

'You make me feel, dearest, as if I were robbing you by taking your money. Would that be no assistance to you?' Vera asked anxiously.

I laughed outright, and she looked wounded.

'Forgive me, darling,' I said ; 'but the idea of your poor little pittance helping me out of my Slough of Despond is really amusing. If Blanche likes to sink her thousands, it is another matter, though whether I am worth the investment strikes me as very doubtful.'

'Then you are not sure she will accept you?' said Vera, with rising anticipation.

'My impression is that she will if I give

her the opportunity. If not, I shall have to fly the country——'

'And take me with you,' interposed Vera, with sparkling eyes.

'My poor little Vera,' I replied pityingly, 'I am so sorry to damp your enthusiasm ; but the life I should have to lead abroad would not be one I could ask you to share.'

'But I would bear anything, and go with you to the end of the world to be near you ; and out of England I should not feel the sense of shame I do now.'

'It is impossible,' I rejoined firmly ; 'and, after all, that is the *dernier ressort*—Blanche is a good card yet.'

'Oh,' she said with a grimace, 'anything but that !'

'I don't love her,' I answered ; 'what does it matter ?'

'But, Bertie dear, it does matter,' she urged earnestly ; 'and if you love me as fondly as I

do you, how would you like to think of me submitting to the blandishments and embraces of some rich suitor, and more, even marrying him, and being everything to him? It is hateful beyond measure, and I can never, never be reconciled to it !’

‘ I must frankly admit that I should detest it as much as ever you do, but, Vera dear,’ I said, shrugging my shoulders, ‘ be reasonable : there is no other alternative, and at least you have the consolation of knowing my love is all yours, and no one can ever take it from you. Rest content with that.’

It was no use ; Vera would not be pacified, and I could not wonder. It was indeed a very hard case for her. When, however, she recognised the futility of argument or entreaty, she did not weary me with it further, and, like the brave little woman she was, locked away her troubles in her own bosom, determined not to spoil the few hours we had together,

for to-morrow I shall have to leave her, and that will be painful enough in itself.

Poor little Vera ! I wonder if she would like to know that all her thoughts, and fears, and hopes are confided to these pages. What interesting reading they would make for Blanche Haviland, secure in her own conceit and self-righteousness, and yet good to perfection after her own narrow lights ! She is as worthy of praise as any Pharisee, whose strict performance of his ceremonial duties is beyond reproach ; yet my heart goes out to Vera, sinner as she is, whose humiliation and self-reproach, coupled with her affection and devotion to me, make her a thousand times the more lovable of the two.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Woodsleigh Towers.

THE stars in their courses have fought against me, and this is the first time I have had an opportunity of opening my diary since I returned. The house is full, and for some reason or other 'dear Mr. Clifford' has been in great request. The change, the excitement, is pleasant and tonic beyond description, in spite of the fact that I really do truly and honestly love Vera. I ought to be a judge of the tender passion, and she has crept into my heart, and established herself there so strongly that nothing can dislodge her. Yet I am glad to be back here. Love and lotus-eating

are decided provocatives to laziness, and, lacking healthful variety of thought and occupation. I can imagine it very easy to sink into a degenerate invertebrate being without animation or energy. Sweet caresses and love's playful dalliance are very well ; but I pride myself on being 'all things to all men,' and if I am more than usually successful amongst women, I should hate to be looked on by the fellows in the smoking-room as nothing better than that emasculate product of civilization, a ladies' man. So I hold my own as a *raconteur* of Rabelaisian stories, discuss grouse and politics, and lay up for myself stores of future dyspepsia by the consumption of much tobacco and strong waters at unholy hours.

Parting with Vera was trying. The brave little woman did her best to be cheerful, but it was a hollow pretence, and though she did not cry or make a scene, her calmness was

the resignation of despair. I wish she was a little less conscientious, more of a *mondaine*, and would take things a little less seriously. She stood by the carriage door to the last, and every now and then I could plainly see a convulsive movement of her throat that spoke badly for her tranquillity when I had departed. I must write and comfort her when I can spare the time.

That tricky sprite Lisette has been at it again, though this time with such beneficial results to myself that I can forgive her the domiciliary visits she has paid to my quarters.

The day after I returned Blanche said she wanted to speak to me alone, and I went to the confessional wondering what little embarrassing secret had come to light now ; but, to my surprise, I found she had put on an apologetic and penitential air, and had a soft look in her eyes that were usually so magisterially piercing.

‘ Oh, Bertie,’ she said, with a sort of queenly humility, ‘ I wanted to see you particularly. I have been taking a great liberty, and I trust you will not consider it an unpardonable one, for I hope I have done you a little service.’

I smiled, wondered mentally what was coming, and assured her of my unbounded forgiveness for anything she might have done.

‘ You promised to let me have the last book of Baring Gould’s just before you went away, but it escaped your memory, and when I was saying so to Miss Forrester, Lisette, who was in the room, interposed, and said she had no doubt she could find it on your table, so I gave her permission to look for it.’

‘ A thousand pardons, my dear Blanche, for my neglect,’ I interrupted ; ‘ I am not often so forgetful of your wishes, but I left by an early train, and must have forgotten it in my hurry.’

‘ Lisette found it without any trouble,’

Blanche continued ; ‘ but this was not all. Later in the day she asked me if I did not think you looked older and anxious and careworn, as she had been struck by your appearance. I replied that I had certainly observed nothing of the kind ; but she stood out for her point, until I could see there was something behind her words. After much pressing, she owned that she had seen on your table several bills with threats of proceedings for payment, and I hope you will forgive me for it, but I allowed her to bring me them, of course without mentioning what I wanted them for. I kept them a few hours, and made a note of the names and amounts, and then told Lisette to put them back again, adding that such inquisitiveness was very reprehensible on her part, and that I ought never to have allowed her to touch them at all. The long and the short of it is that I have sent each of them bank-notes in your name

for the amount due. Now, Bertie, for the sake of our old—friendship, promise me you will not be offended, or think I have taken an unpardonable liberty.'

A cloud had gathered on my brow involuntarily, as I thought of Lisette overhauling my papers ; but Blanche looked humbled, and her haughty lip had a semblance of a tremble about its clearly-cut curves. How could I be proof against such kindness ?

'My dear Blanche,' I replied gratefully, 'what can I say ? I am overwhelmed by your goodness and your unexampled generosity. I wish I could thank you as you deserve. Pray do not speak of offence for a moment ; I should be the veriest churl in existence to dream of such a thing. Your kindness makes me feel my own unworthiness.'

'Don't say that,' she interposed in rather disappointed tones, as if she had expected a

warmer, more lover-like recognition of her gift. 'You know it gives me great pleasure to do anything for you.'

Don Juan has weak moments like angels' visits, few and far between. *Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit*. Everyone is an emotional ass at times. A great wave of gratitude to Blanche, and of consciousness how badly I had behaved to her, swept over me, and I knelt at her feet and kissed the hem of her dress.

'Blanche dearest,' I cried in impassioned tones, 'you are an angel! You have returned good for evil fiftyfold. Stoop down and kiss me once; don't think me fallen too low. I cannot help loving you, and, wretch that I am, I have forfeited all claim to your esteem.'

She bent down, and rested her lips lightly on mine for an instant.

'There is always hope, you know,' she

answered, quite coquettishly for her, 'for the sinner that repenteth.' And then, as if fearing she had said too much, she left me on my knees and retired with much less than her usual stateliness.

I was sincerely relieved by her departure. I have some few rags of self-respect left, and I was ashamed, positively ashamed of myself. Willing as Blanche evidently is to take me back into favour again, I cannot forget how I have betrayed her—how, little more than a week since, Vera's passionate young kisses were pressed on my lips ; and after Blanche's munificence I cannot make tender speeches and meet her eye, while all the time my own Judas-like conduct stands out in so black a contrast to the purity and goodness of hers.

It is a remarkably pleasant sensation to discover that the bulk of your most pressing liabilities has been unexpectedly cleared off ;

but, on the other hand, it is intensely humiliating to remember your indebtedness in this and a thousand other instances to a woman to whom you have been doubly unfaithful, and whom you are even now deceiving. When she loves you in addition, and this must always wake a little responsive tenderness in the coldest of breasts, you have the pleasure of feeling yourself about as promising a scoundrel as there is to be met with out of Coldbath Fields or Millbank, and who shall say some of the biggest criminals are not at large ?

What Lisette's motive in exhibiting my pecuniary affairs to Blanche can be I cannot surmise, except it was to estrange me from her, and, curiously enough, it has had the diametrically opposite effect. Blanche and I are certainly nearer a reconciliation than we have been for some time. I have but to speak, and all would be well again ; but if

she is desirous of returning to the old understanding with marriage in the near future, she has gone the very way to defeat her own ends, for such a re-establishment of my credit has given me a new lease of single life, freedom, and Vera.

It strikes me as a wicked waste of money to have paid them all in full. Something on account would have satisfied the most rapacious of them. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will metaphorically pat themselves on the back when they hear of it, as they lick their lips and think of the good time coming when all their extortionate demands will be satisfied and their nice little harvest of profit got in. I must take advantage of this prosperity and order some more cigars, and I am sure Benjamin cannot refuse me another hundred just to carry on the war with, and I will have it in cash, too—no execrable sherry or Brummagem old masters for me.

I have forgotten to note, and it is a detail of some little importance, that yesterday Blanche remarked to me :

‘My maid, Lisette, seems to take a great interest in your going and coming. If I ask her suddenly where you are to be found, she always replies that you are in the conservatory, or the billiard-room, or somewhere else ; and then she remembers how strange it looks, and adds, “Of course, madame, I cannot tell, but I have seen Mr. Clifford there before about this time ;” and when you went to town last, she asked me to spare her for two days to go and see some relative or other.’

I could have enlightened Blanche considerably on this point, but I only said carelessly :

‘Really ? I think she might employ her time better, and I don’t suppose her absence had anything to do with my journey.’

‘Why, of course not,’ replied Blanche with

a touch of hauteur and asperity ; ‘ you do misunderstand me sometimes. You cannot surely think me so foolish as to suppose there is any connection between your doings and a servant. I was only remarking on the coincidence.’

Lisette was hardly flesh and blood in Blanche’s estimation, only a mere machine that worked for wages. If Blanche knew the truth, I honestly believe she would faint ; and yet she must have heard of pretty servants being kissed when the mistress’s back was turned. *Eheu !* I shall indeed sell my freedom if I marry her : how good I shall have to appear, and I am by no means fond of playing the hypocrite in that way.

I have a little adventure to record, a little pleasant incident to enliven my self-humiliation about Blanche, and my thoughts of Vera, which are not of the cheerfullest. It was wrong of me, but the heroine was a deucedly

pretty girl with a charming disposition that drew me out of myself, and after half an hour's chat we might have known one another for years.

Her name was Burroughes, and she was a new arrival on the day that Blanche so delicately informed me of the payment of my debts. Providence allotted Miss Burroughes to me at dinner, for if there was anyone especially clever, well read, or anything of a lion, he always fell to Blanche's share, on account of her brilliancy and great mental culture, which were too much for any ordinary mortal. Evelyn Burroughes—for it was not very long before I knew her Christian name, and she had no objection to my using it—and I got on swimmingly. She was simpatica, and evidently thought me so too, for we found many and many a kindred topic for discussion. She talked away with a pretty animation, and knew nothing of the *affaire* Blanche, for she

failed to notice two or three looks that the latter gave her, that were most certainly not expressive of sisterly affection.

In the evening, after dinner, Miss Burroughes was wanted to sing. Someone had seen her in Mrs. Fawcett's boudoir writing letters. 'Would Mr. Clifford mind fetching her?' I jumped up with an alacrity that Blanche must have noticed if her back had not been turned.

When I reached my destination the room appeared to be empty, but looking more carefully, I found Miss Burroughes snugly ensconced in a cosy nook behind a screen, and lost in thought until my coming aroused her. I should have said she was waiting there on purpose, had she been like some girls I have met.

I came to the side of her chair, and laid my hand lightly on her shoulder. She looked up at me with a tender glance, and without a

word I bent down until our lips met. No rebuff, no resentment of my confounded impudence ; but a clinging, loving kiss rewarded me, and our souls seemed to go out to one another. But there was no time for delay, and, putting my arm gently round her, I once, twice more tasted the sweetness of that little soft mouth. Not a word had been uttered, but Evelyn had given one sigh of contented happiness. I explained my errand, and we went back in silence to the others, who, if they had scrutinized us closely, must have noticed the rapt, dreamy look in her eyes.

This was progressing at an alarming rate, but on the following day I encountered her, and I could tell in a moment she knew all about Blanche. Our eyes met, and I could read a gentle reproach, softened, though, by a wistfulness that spoke pardon for anything. If it had not been for Lisette, and those disinterested busybodies who are always

ready to note and comment on every little detail, I must have followed up so promising a conquest ; but, after all, it was effected, and there was nothing more to win.

Once let the citadel fall, and the fighting is done. There are no more hopes and fears, no delightful hesitation and uncertainty as to how your advances may be received : the salt has lost its savour. There is not half the enjoyment in an *affaire* like this compared to one in which I have to make sure of every step, employ every artifice, at times show a humble diffidence, and again an *ad captandum* boldness.

Give me the conquest that has to be made by imperceptible degrees, by tender *œillades*, by faint pressures of the hand, by ever-increasing familiarities, until the grand culminating moment arrives, when the coy or proud beauty bows her head on your breast, and confesses by her *abandon*, if not in words, that she loves

you. Is it not the same in everything ? The difficulty enhances the pleasure of the pursuit, and of the attainment of your end. What else induces your keen angler to spend hours of uncertainty, and often discomfort, before he lands his big salmon, or the sportsman to spend days, and walk miles, on the chance of a shot at a stag of ten ?

But a truce to platitudes. Lisette has not yet shown her hand, and, beyond jealousy, her motive for finding out the continuance of my intercourse with Vera is so far an unknown quantity. I often think the match is very near the powder-magazine, and the day after I kissed Evelyn Burroughes I felt as if I could have persuaded her to marry me—she has money, too—and fled with her to some distant clime, far from all this espionage and deceit. But we should have had to start afresh, and she must have forgiven me for all my past transgressions, which, vulgarly

speaking, would be 'rather a large order.' Heigho ! the further I go, the deeper I get into difficulties. *Imprimis* there is Vera, then comes Blanche ; that firebrand Mrs. Nelson may turn up again at any moment ; Evelyn loves me, but for her own sake she will be silent ; and then, I suppose, I must count that interfering little devil Lisette amongst my admirers.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANY doubts I may have had as to Lisette's little game have been completely set at rest. I had a letter from Vera this morning, and I have retired from the *tabagie* at an unusually early hour to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. My unwonted absence has been the subject of much discussion, and the comments thereon were more edifying than polite. *Par exemple*, when I announced my departure : ‘ *You* going, Clifford ; you must be training for the beauty stakes !’

‘ No,’ chimed in another, ‘ the matrimonial.’

And then there was a volley of nods and becks and wreathed smiles, for Blanche’s

penchant for me of course was common property.

‘Sit down, man, and enjoy life while you can,’ was the admonition of a good fellow, but a very much married man.

I was proof against it all, and I retired to my sitting-room, where I knew my thoughtful hostess with considerate hospitality had provided enough seltzer and Glenlivet to make me ‘see snakes’ if I had a mind to. See what it is to have friends at Court, and what a valuable ally the mammon of unrighteousness is if properly cultivated !

I fortified myself with the driest cigar I could pick—Cabanas had executed my order now with profuse apologies for the ‘misunderstanding’—and a tall glass of liquid Lethe. It might have been a bulky brief, this letter of Vera’s, so portentous in its length and its closely-written pages. I had a presentiment when I opened it this morning

that it contained bad news, and now I peruse it with muttered curses—not loud, but deep, and if all I say I wish were to happen, Lisette would be in a bad way indeed.

It is less trouble to copy Vera's letter than to tell the story—nay, I would pin the actual document in these pages, but that it would be a bad precedent, and if she sent me many more half as voluminous, they would burst the binding of the neat volume I have adopted now, with its monogram, lock and key, and everything complete, that has not been paid for, and in all human probability never will, unless I screw my courage to the sticking-place and marry Blanche.

Lisette has been on the war-path with a vengeance. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ !*

‘Marine Villa, Lambton-on-Sea,

‘Thursday.

‘MY OWN DARLING BERTIE,

‘First of all my fondest love to you, dearest, with many, many thanks for all your

goodness. I am afraid to trouble you again about poor little me, but I am sure I ought to warn you for your own sake, and it is such a pleasure to write to you and tell you everything.

‘I have had Mr. Simpson here, and although I was sorry for the poor fellow, I was amused : as if *anything* or *anybody* could make me believe a word against you, my dear one, who have all my trust and confidence and love. Still, Bertie dear, when he assured me you were already married, although you know I believe you implicitly, my heart doubted for a moment, and thought—only for an instant—that perhaps it was the true reason why you could not marry me. But I knew better, and I am happier now, my own, own love, though I had to deceive him, and let him think I was your wife. But I will tell you all about it.

‘Yesterday afternoon it was raining too

much for me to go out, and I was sitting reading your last dear letter over for the hundredth time in my little bay window, when I saw an unfamiliar figure striding down the road. You know a stranger in Lambton is an object of general curiosity, and I suppose I shared it, for I got out your race-glasses and looked at him. There was no mistaking the tall figure and the clumsy, country walk, and my first impulse was to run upstairs and tell Mrs. Smith to say I was out, or had the small-pox, or something ; but I reflected that if he had come all this way to see me he would not be easily put off, so, although my position rose up before me, I decided to face him and have it out.'

(' Just like my own brave little girl ! ' I ejaculated, as I paused to take a pull at my tumbler and relight my cigar.)

' The window was just a little way open, and I heard him ask for Mrs. Dacre, so it must

have been that horrid Lisette who told him our address. I always did *detest* that woman. Of course he was asked in. I really could have laughed. He rushed at me hungrily, as if he could devour me, and I am sure he would have attempted to kiss me if Mrs. Smith had not been just behind him. As it was, he took both my hands in his and squeezed them so tightly that they hurt yet.

“ “So you are,” he gasped with excitement, and paused, evidently seeking a word, and, gentleman as he is at heart, anxious not to wound me—“you are—you are *with* Mr. Clifford!”

“ “Mr. Simpson!” I answered with dignity, “what do you mean? I am with no one.” And oh, dearest, it was so hard to keep up.

“ “Oh, miss, forgive me,” he stammered; “I am so glad to see you again. I didn’t think what I was saying.”

“I tried to turn the conversation.

“ I am always glad to see an old friend. Won't you sit down ?”

‘ He had not recovered his wits yet, but he sat down in a most uncomfortable attitude after awkwardly attempting to hand me a chair near his own. Bertie dear, I suppose I am really as free as you are ; but I would no more have allowed Mr. Simpson to be familiar with me than I would have dreamt of it if I had been really your wife.’

(‘ Thank heaven for that !’ I say as I write it.)

‘ He breathed heavily for a few moments, and mopped his face with a hideous bandanna, and then said :

“ You'll excuse me, Miss Vera, but I fancied you might be in trouble, and I came to see if I could help you.”

“ Very kind of you indeed, Mr. Simpson,” I replied ; “ but really it was quite unnecessary.

If such was the case I could hardly come to you for help."

" "I dare say, miss," he said, as if he was disappointed. "I am only a plain country chap, and I don't know much about things; but I thought, as I loved you, perhaps it might make a difference."

" "But, you see, I don't want any assistance, and I told you before that what you wished could never be; so is it quite fair of you to come and persecute a poor little unprotected woman like me?"

" "Oh, miss," he said, grieved by my appeal, "don't put it like that. I did want to be a true friend. I would have helped you without thinking of a return for my love."

" "Well, when I want a friend I will promise to come to you," I answered lightly, trying to keep the conversation within ordinary limits. And then I went on: "You will

let me offer you some refreshment? Will you have tea? or, if you prefer it, my landlady can send for some brandy, and I have soda-water in the house."

'I got up to ring the bell, but he was on his knees before I could prevent him, and I did not want any scandal with Mrs. Smith—there was quite enough publicity through the window.

"Miss Vera," he urged, in anything but pianissimo tones, "don't play with me! You must be unhappy. I know all. Can't I help you?"

"Mr. Simpson," I answered in pretended astonishment, though my heart smote me for the deceit, "what do you mean? Pray get up at once, or what will people think?"

"Vera darling, you believe I love you. I am not cute enough to know these London ways, but what am I to think? You are staying here under a name that is not your

own, and I should never have found you out but for someone who helped me."

"But I wish you had not found me," I interposed hurriedly; "it can only give you pain to see me, and I particularly told Mr. Clifford not to give anyone my address."

"Ah, but I didn't get it from him," he answered mysteriously.

"It is of no consequence where you got it at all, but for goodness' sake put an end to this absurd scene. You see I am not in trouble, or in need of assistance from you or anyone. Do be sensible, unless you wish to offend me."

"Tell me, Vera—tell me the truth. Are you Mr. Clifford's *wife*?" he pleaded.

"I felt my face crimsoning, but I answered steadily:

"That is a question I have no intention of answering. It is a subject on which Mr.

Clifford wishes me to say nothing, and how can it concern you ?”

“ “By the love I bear you,” he answered, “it is everything to me.”

“ “It strikes me, Mr. Simpson, you are just a little like the dog in the manger. Because you can’t win me yourself, you wish no one else to. It is touching of you, but rather selfish.”

“ “Don’t trifle with me,” he urged with a rough eloquence. “If you knew all the anxiety I have suffered, all the sleepless nights I have had picturing you at the mercy of that villain——”

“ “Hush, Mr. Simpson,” I interrupted hurriedly ; “someone may hear you, and I will listen to nothing against Mr. Clifford. He has been kindness and consideration personified.”

“ “Then you won’t confide in me ?” he said in more subdued, but still intense, tones. “I

came to pity you, to rescue you, to tell you how I loved you in spite of everything, and that there was always a home for you under my roof as my wife, no matter what the world might say. I came to find out the truth, and I would have killed Mr. Clifford had he betrayed and deserted you !”

‘ He looked so savage and threatening that I really had to resort to an *equivoque*, for I could not bear to contemplate that huge dangerous animal coming to harm you, dearest.

‘ So I said, “ You might have spared yourself the trouble and the journey. I am well and contented and happy, as I told you in my letter ; and if my husband wishes to keep our marriage a secret, I have nothing to say against it, for I owe everything to his generosity.”

‘ “ Then you are married to him ?” Mr. Simpson answered, looking crestfallen, like a man baulked of his revenge. “ Bless him for

that, though it destroys all my hopes of gaining you for my own ; and I have lived on the thought of having you always beside me, and your dear little face to welcome me when I came home. All is blank despair now !”

“ Really, Mr. Simpson,” I said, “ you must excuse me if I ask you to cease speaking in this strain. If I have chosen Mr. Clifford in preference to you, I surely have a right to please myself, and it is unmanly of you to keep up these continual repinings, which can do no good. Put me out of your head, and look for someone else ; there are just as good fish in the sea as ever were caught.”

“ But then, how could Mr. Clifford marry you ?” he asked suspiciously. “ Has he got a divorce, for he had one wife ?”

“ My heart sank within me for a moment, and then I knew it was only a ruse of yours, so I answered nothing.

‘After a moment’s sullen pause, he went on : “I am all in a fog with such wicked ways, and when I was at Woodsleigh, I heard tell that he was sweet on Miss Haviland. Is it right for him to go on deceiving her ?”

‘“What can you be thinking of?” I replied. I knew for your sake that I must put him off the scent, much as it went against the grain. “What idle gossip have you been listening to ? I was Miss Haviland’s companion ; she is a very old friend of Mr. Clifford’s, but he has kept our marriage a secret on account of a rich uncle who wishes him to marry her. Now I have set your mind at rest, won’t you have some tea or something ?”

‘I was anxious to make a distraction, for the interview was taxing my powers of dissimulation to the utmost, and was fatiguing, to put it mildly.

“No, thank you,” he answered bitterly; “I could not eat or drink in *his* house.”

“I am sorry you bear Bertie so much ill-will,” I said. “I should like to think of you always as a friend, but I can be friendly with no one who is not a friend of his.”

“I’m only human,” he replied passionately, “and how can I be his friend when he has robbed me of the only woman I ever loved? Good-bye !” and before I could prevent him, he had taken my hand and was covering it with despairing kisses.

‘After that I watched him stalking moodily up the road with head depressed. And then I rang for Mrs. Smith and studied her countenance carefully to see if she had heard anything, but listening at doors must have been too machiavelian for these simple-minded Lambton people, for her face wore nothing more than its customary expression of good-hearted stupidity.

‘*Voilà!* I think I have not forgotten anything, and I do hope, Bertie dearest, you will think I have done right. I fear my having allowed Mr. Simpson to think we were married may cause complications for you in the future ; but I was bound to try and put his suspicions to rest, for I had the present in view, and men like him, if very slow to be roused, are often dangerous when their passions are let loose. If I had told him the truth, I feel certain he would have gone straight to you to call you to account, unless I could have made him happy and so persuaded him not to, which was out of the question ; and a brawl at Woodsleigh would have been horrid for you. If you have to marry Miss Haviland, for goodness’ sake take care the wedding is in London, or Simpson may be turning up and forbidding the banns, or doing something else equally idiotic.

‘ Now, dearest, I am sure you must be tired

of reading this long letter by now, so I will only just stop to say I am quite well, and as contented as I can be ; and, with my fondest love, believe me,

‘ Your own faithful

‘ VERA.’

Verily I am tired. Vera’s caligraphy, though clear on the whole, is uncertain in places, while now and again is a blur which may have been a tear falling on the paper. The last sheet is crossed and recrossed distractingly, but I have mastered it at last.

I have often said I would not marry Blanche, and I would defy everybody ; but those were reckless moments, and now, when I realize how seriously necessary it is that I should sell her my freedom, I am watched by Lisette, and thwarted and embarrassed by her machinations at every turn. I shall have to speak to her seriously and put an end to this

annoyance ; but what if she will not listen ? I cannot complain to Blanche of her surveillance and seek her dismissal, for the whole story would come out directly ; and, bad as my record is, I think that a flirtation with Lisette and Vera under my 'protection,' the while I am Blanche's half-accepted lover, would be—well, after that the deluge !

The Nelson imbroglio is over, forgiven evidently, if not forgotten, and Blanche has shown a decided disposition not to rake up the past, and, in fact, to start afresh ; but the discovery of this new flourishing liaison, blooming under her nose as it were, would destroy the last relic of Christian charity she has. I should be looked on as utterly past redemption, and I should be banished from her august presence into outer darkness.

And it is imperative that I should marry Blanche, *vogue la galère*, so I must have all my wits about me to foil Lisette's schemes.

My experience goes to prove that those persons who are so very crooked—or shall I say diplomatic?—in their ways, frequently come to direst grief. They never tell the truth if a lie will do as well; the way straight to an end has no attraction for their peculiarly constituted minds, if by any possibility they can diplomatize round and round to it, often having gone tremendously out of their way, and used an infinitude of trouble that straightforwardness would have avoided.

Lisette is one of this genus, and, as I say, their plots frequently come to an untimely end, but unfortunately they often involve others in the crash; and if she is planning some big *coup* that may end badly for her, it may bring in its train my total downfall. If she loves me as she professes she does, I am afraid no bribery would tempt her, and yet she can hardly think it likely for a moment that I should marry her.

CHAPTER XX.

I HAVE seen Lisette, and I could not keep my temper—I have got the worst of it. When I met her I began :

‘Look here, Lisette, what do you mean by playing the spy on me and my concerns? If you continue this annoyance, I shall have to complain to Miss Haviland, and you will lose your place.’

‘Oh no,’ she answered slowly, and with malicious emphasis, ‘I do not think Monsieur Clifford will complain to Mees Haviland. Lambton is free to everyone, and I may have relations there as well as other people. The sea air is charming—very fine—I like it.’

‘But what the deuce are you up to?’ I interposed hotly; ‘what are you scheming for? How can it matter to you?—you don’t care a pin for Miss Haviland!’

‘*Fi donc!* not care for my good mistress!’

‘Of course you don’t; you have only got some ridiculous idea in your head, which you had better get out as soon as possible. Do you think I am going to put up with your espionage?’

‘Monsieur will do just as he pleases,’ was the placid, irritating reply.

‘But I tell you I will not have it,’ I said angrily; ‘I shall find means to put an end to it that you will be sorry for me to employ; and it will be too late then.’

‘Guard thyself then, my friend!’ Lisette blazed out angrily; ‘you have lied to me, you have tried to deceive me: use your means, which are *comme cela*’—snapping her fingers contemptuously. ‘*Pour moi*, I may leave

Miss Haviland ; *n'importe*, Alphonse has wanted me for two years. But for yourself, it will aid your suit, no doubt, that Miss Haviland learns that at Lambton is a little nest, which contains her old *demoiselle de compagnie*, Miss Marchmont ; but she is not Miss Marchmont now, she is Madame Dacre, and Monsieur Dacre is like to Miss Haviland's *fiancé*, Mr. Clifford, *à merveille*.'

'Damnation !' I growled, as I realized how completely I was in her power.

'Oh, monsieur !' exclaimed Lisette with pretended horror, '*je vous prie*. But listen : Mr. Dacre is not the husband. Oh no, he knows better. He is going to marry the rich Miss Haviland, and he is not *bigame*, *pas si bête* ; but tell me, *mon ami*, will Miss Haviland prefer Mr. Dacre-Clifford better as the husband of Miss Marchmont, or as her *séducteur* ? Is she more likely to marry him as the latter than she would be if he were the

first ? Yet who knows ?' continued Lisette, before I could get a word in edgeways ; ' I may be doing Mr. Clifford a service. Miss Vera Marchmont-Clifford-Dacre has a lover—*mon Dieu ! un homme grand et bien épris*. She will comfort herself of him when Mr. Dacre is away, and in the end Madame Dacre will be Madame Simpson. *Tant pis pour elle,*' added Lisette reflectively and philosophically.

' You think so ?' I said interrogatively, and I smiled at the idea of Vera preferring Matthew Simpson to me even as a husband.

' *Mais oui,*' she answered, ' our little *ingénue*, Vera, says she is Madame Clifford, but it is *une blague magnifique*. Mistaire Simpson believes her, but I tell him no, it is not so, and I say "*Allons*, go in and win," as you English say. " She is but Mistaire Clifford's toy ; he will tire of her next week—you can tell her so yourself."

And then he grinds his teeth, and talks of "damned scoundrels," and that he could swing for them ; and I say, "Bah ! better live for Mees Marchmont, if she is ruined, than die for Mistaire Clifford, who is *fiels du diable*, and will come of himself to the gallows ;" and he says, " Yes," so '—shutting her mouth with a vicious snap—'and he will wait a week or two until Vera has forgotten Mistaire Clifford, and then she must marry him.'

' You—you miserable wretch !' I burst out, hardly finding words in my indignation ; ' you have said all this ? I could strangle you, you mischief-making fiend !'

Lisette faced me, glaring angrily, with head thrown back, like a cobra-di-capella arching itself to strike.

' Did you not assure me that your liaison with Mees Marchmont was at an end ? Did you not take me in your arms and tell me

you loved me ? It is then of no consequence to deceive me, to play me false, because I am only a servant. But I can be jealous as well as my mistress, and, what is more, I have you so'—illustrating her words with a fly between her finger and thumb, and suiting the action to the word—'and I can crush you like that. You say to yourself, It is nothing; she is but Lisette. But Lisette can love and hate—yes, and make to suffer anyone who is *traître* to her. It is not enough that Miss Marchmont is your mistress, that you are Mrs. Nelson's *amant*, that you are deceiving Miss Haviland, but you must even make to care for you that silly girl, Miss Burroughes !'

I started. Now, how could Lisette have known of that, unless she was possessed of second sight, or was indeed a witch ? But I had better not compromise Miss Burroughes even to the servants' hall, so I made answer lightly :

‘Did you see that? The merest flirtation *pour passer le temps.*’

‘Yes,’ Lisette replied passionately, ‘and you expect me to look on tranquilly, and that I do not mind. I love you; you made me that, I told you so, and I, do I kiss Mr. Belton, do I coquet with Mr. Mainwaring, or make of myself the mistress of Captain Beausabreur? No, because I love you—and you, have you not done all these things? And because I am only Lisette you think it is no matter—you can mock yourself of me as you please. But you are mistaken—if I cannot have love, I will have r-r-revenge!’

Lisette was so unutterably tragic at the close of this peroration that I laughed outright; but with her it was no laughing matter, and I noticed her face harden pitilessly and her eyes glitter. I had listened to all her speeches, not able, and still less caring, to defend myself.

‘Really, Lisette, you will be the death of me. Whoever heard of constancy to a *soubrette*? I shall have to remind you that there is a little difference in our positions.’

‘There is indeed,’ she answered scornfully. ‘I, who could bring a *dot* to my husband, and you, the *roué*, who has spent every *centime* he has. A word, and I could bring your creditors down in one swoop, and they would tear you to pieces.’

‘For which interesting information,’ I interposed haughtily, ‘I presume you are indebted to the examination of my papers the other day, against the recurrence of which I have taken effectual measures; and let me warn you frankly that, whatever may be the consequences to myself, another attempt will entail your immediate dismissal.’

‘That is fine speaking,’ she answered contemptuously, ‘from a *coquin* who cannot pay

his own tailor's bill, and his *fiancée* must take pity on him !'

'Confound it, woman !' I said frantically, 'this is too much ! Will you keep that viper's tongue still ? or I shall forget myself, and strike you !'

'That would be worthy of you,' Lisette answered, growing calmer the more irritated I became. 'Come now, confess there is not so much difference between us. Love me, be true to me—you cannot escape me—and some day we will be married, and you shall want no better wife.'

'A pretty programme, truly !' I said, laughing, but without much mirth. 'I have not sunk so low as that yet, whatever I may come to.'

'You laugh,' she said melodramatically, while her face, that had softened to tenderness during her last words, was now transformed into a mask of intense hatred. 'Then you

shall suffer. You think to win Miss Haviland for your wife. She is willing, and she might have been yours already, but for your *sacrée* English *froidueur* that has no love, no passion in it. But you shall never marry her, if I have to tell her the shameful story of your Vera to prevent it! You have scoffed at me, and the offer of my love has received but disdain and mockery. Now you shall feel my power, and I have shown you what I can do. Miss Marchmont shall cease to love you, Mrs. Nelson shall disturb your peace, Mr. Simpson shall horsewhip you, and Miss Haviland shall come to look on you with loathing and contempt!

‘*Nous verrons,*’ I answered calmly. ‘And now, as you remind me how mistaken I was ever to listen to you at all, and how little I thought I should have to descend so low as this by just asking a pretty girl for a kiss, I

think we may as well consider the interview at an end.'

I bowed—politeness is a weakness of mine—and was turning away, when I was arrested by the sound of heartrending sobs. I turned again, and there was Lisette in a supplicating attitude on her knees, weeping bitterly. I waited to hear the result.

'I love you! I love you!' she cried, 'and you are cruel to me. I hate you, and yet I love you! Forgive me, I am mad—I don't know what I am doing; but I shall kill myself if you will not be kind to me!'

More tears followed, but what saith the poet?

'Decortications of the golden grain
Are set to allure the aged fowl—in vain.'

I had fallen not a little in my own estimation already, but still Lisette was not an enemy to be made light of, and a truce is preferable to open warfare when your adversary has all

the points in his favour. Besides which, I hate the sight of a woman in distress, and I forgot all her plots and insolence for the moment.

She clung to my knees in the most humiliated attitude and implored :

‘Pity me, I love you ; I am not cold like you English. I have hot blood in my veins, and my heart is on fire with love and jealousy. I could worship you when you say you love me ; I could kill you when you neglect me for someone else !’

What policy to adopt I knew not. Don Juan ought to be fertile in expedients, and shine in a moment like this ; but I am hedged up on all sides. I cannot act for the moment, dry up Lisette’s tears, and swear eternal fidelity, or she will be reminding me of it some day in Blanche’s presence, if I am making love to her. *Peste !* as Lisette would say.

However, I try a middle course, and say :

‘ Why, Lisette dear, cheer up and be reasonable : you know I can’t possibly marry you. Why not be content with my love and a few kisses sometimes ? We can’t get everything we want in this world.’

‘ No, I could bear a great deal,’ she answered jealously ; ‘ but there is Miss Marchmont. She has your love, she lies in your arms, and has the place I covet so dearly. I am desperate ; I would sell my very soul to have you for my own : no crime should stand in my way. I can prevent Miss Haviland marrying you,’ she added, stamping her foot impatiently ; ‘ but, *imbécile* that I am, I can devise no plan of compelling you to marry me.’

‘ Which is quite as well,’ I answered, ‘ for if we lived together a month I should be surprised. Seriously, there is rather too much of the tiger cat in your disposition for anything but a padded room.’

‘ But I would make you love me,’ she replied eagerly.

‘ You forget,’ I answered, yielding to her ideas for a moment, ‘ that unless I marry Miss Haviland I shall be a pauper.’

‘ Yes,’ she said viciously, driven to acknowledge the truth, ‘ and that is why you fear me, why I have hold upon you.’

‘ Possibly,’ I said carelessly. I looked at my watch and found time had fled more rapidly than I thought. ‘ I must go now ; and look here, Lisette, do be rational if you want me to care for you at all.’

‘ It is so easy for you to say that ; you do not love me’— with a discontented pout ; and then, holding up her face to be kissed, she went on : ‘ Don’t leave me so coldly ; kiss me once.’

I am an awful fool where pretty faces and warm kisses are concerned. After all that had happened, the virtuous hero would have spurned Lisette from him with an eloquent

gesture, and a bit of high falutin' ; but the sight of dainty little upturned lips *wanting* to be kissed is irresistible, and of course I yielded to the temptation. A lingering, drawing caress held me a moment, and then Lisette released me.

' See,' she said quite merrily, ' I could have compromised you now, and made Miss Haviland so jealous.'

I turned round hastily, and there, on some rising ground that separated us from the house and garden, I espied a man with a confounded camera on a stand. He was a good way off and had his back to us ; but I was not going to risk anything. I did not stop to see who it was, but walked away hurriedly and unceremoniously, while Lisette disappeared in a belt of trees.

The day after.

Now may all the stars that ever had the slightest share in, or the most indirect influence

on my career be devoutly thanked! The difference of a moment has saved me, while, if I ever again wear anything conspicuous or different from my fellow-men, I deserve to be kicked. The photographic fiend of yesterday, good friend of mine as he is, I could have drowned cheerfully, although he did his best to repair his fault; but a man should not indulge in such *bêtises* in public. Let us hope he catches his own sister in like manner, flirting with the worst detrimental in the house, and I shall be avenged.

It is trying for one's nerves to have these surprises sprung upon one, and one's imagination is often lacking in ready invention; but if I don't get on, I shall never reach the end of the story.

Harry Fawcett, my hostess's son, and of course the apple of her eye, is one of those crazy idiots who have always got some new hobby in hand, from chemistry to chiromancy.

At times he calls us to witness some new experiment, in which the explosion takes place at the wrong moment and frightens the women, while the resulting stench drives us all into precipitate retreat. Again, he has inflicted on us a magic-lantern entertainment, where we were all kept in the dark for a quarter of an hour, to the immense delight of the couples who were properly matched, and then part of the slides appeared upside down ; while one meant to represent the Lord Mayor's Show first of all refused to work, and when at length it did, the procession had a jerky, zigzag motion akin to that of a drunken cripple.

Then I remember his palmistry was a distinct failure. In addition to predicting the future, he could read the present from our hands, so he averred. He impressed upon us at the commencement the absolute truth of the indications, and then went on to credit all the

ladies of 'a certain age' with ten years more than they owned to, which they will remember to his disadvantage to their dying day ; and when Sir Donald McLovelace, whose moral character is better known than respected, uttered a smothered curse, and his wife went into hysterics because Harry insisted that her husband had six children, while the world is only cognizant of two, everyone decided against the continuance of the entertainment, which only deserved that name at the hands of a cautious few who declined to submit themselves for examination.

Master Harry's latest fad is the black art, photography. Praiseworthy in itself, it might have played the very deuce with me. Some evil spirit prompted him to try and take an instantaneous photograph of the people playing tennis yesterday morning. Of course he remarked my absence, and 'how well Clifford's blazer with its blue and white

stripes would have "come out." ' Now, as it happened, I was wearing that identical garment, which had been noticed and admired, when I met Lisette. His camera was one of those infernal contrivances yeapt 'detective,' but it was mounted on a stand in this case for steadiness.

He came airily into the drawing-room last night to exhibit the atrocities he had perpetrated, and mentioned that, when he had mounted the hill, he planted his camera for a moment while he looked round for the most advantageous point of view. He turned round directly, only to find he had accidentally opened the shutter, and one plate was exposed, and he had developed it. Of course, the wretched machine was pointing at us, and the plate was not over-exposed or underdone, or whatever the confounded jargon is. He had noticed two figures in the background, and remembering there was a reading-glass on the

console, he had brought the negative down out of curiosity to see if he could identify them.

The brainless ape was examining it closely, while the other negatives were being passed round with idiotic expressions like these: 'Oh, do look! your face is black.' 'How funny Miss Burroughes looks with one foot in the air!' 'Why, Captain Bertram, the nets look wider at one end than the other, and your racket is nearly as big as you are!'

Presently Harry chirped out, 'I think I can make the girl out—it must be Miss Haviland's maid; and who *is* the man? Can't spot him at all, but those stripes—why, it's Clifford, surely! Had you got your blazer on this morning, old man?'

This to me, who, with only two or three others, was standing near. Blanche, thank goodness! had disappeared somewhere.

There was a perceptible pause, and I answered in a constrained tone, I could not

help it, 'Oh yes, I was speaking to Lisette this morning.' I tried to look unconcerned as I added, 'What a remarkable invention ! I wasn't with her a minute, and your camera happened on the exact time. What a capital idea it is, something like a phonograph ! Let it off while no one knows, and you ought to get all sorts of fun !' I felt most devoutly thankful the infernal machine had not 'detected' us a moment sooner, when I was kissing Lisette.

I don't know why I should have been so nervous and stupid about it, but I fancied everyone was looking at me and drawing unfavourable conclusions, as Lisette was pretty and fast.

To give the devil his due, Fawcett was pretty quick to grasp the situation, and the negative dropped on a stool, but, as ill-luck would have it, held together. He got up with a pretence of looking for it, and trod on

it clumsily. 'What a pity !' he remarked philosophically ; 'I would have printed a positive from it. So curious that you should just be in focus at that exact moment !'

Here I was in hopes that the incident had terminated, but I reckoned too quickly. There was the usual contingent of mischief-making busybodies who pass their time in gossip and scandal, and any little tit-bit of intelligence that can be made to bear a bad construction is welcome, more especially in a country house, where news is often scarce, and consequently at a premium. Blanche was not one to listen to petty personalities, but in this case she had the subject forced on her attention.

She met me this afternoon with the remark, 'What a singular talent you have for getting yourself talked about ! Everyone is discussing the photograph of you and Lisette, and with all sorts of unkind innuendoes into

the bargain. Those two disagreeable old women, Mrs. Braithwaite and Mrs. Talbot, were near me this morning at lunch, and were talking it over — for my benefit, I'm sure. One said, "It's such a pity ! Mr. Clifford is such a charming man, and with a servant, too — so low !" And then the other chimed in, "The girl is very engaging in her appearance, and men are always fools where a pretty face is concerned." My blood boiled with indignation, but I thought it beneath me to notice such vulgar slander. Still, it is *bourgeois* of you to have your name mixed up in such things, and what could you have to say to Lisette ?

'That is just my secret, Blanche dear,' I replied affectionately ; 'wait a few days, and you shall know all.'

Most opportunely it happened that Blanche's birthday was just at hand, so I saw my way out of the dilemma comfortably.

‘I have asked Lisette,’ Blanche answered, ‘and she said you had told her not to mention what you were talking about.’

‘Quite right,’ I said approvingly and condescendingly, as if my conscience was quite clear ; ‘she is a good girl.’

‘Do you know, Bertie, she has struck me lately as being rather peculiar. I don’t know how to express it exactly, but, if I mention you, she talks wildly, and hardly seems to know what she is saying. If she were anyone else but a servant, I should say she was in love with you ; but she knows her place better.’

This was very fine, and I could have enlightened Blanche how love laughs not only at locksmiths, but at social distinctions ; but I must perforce be silent on that point, so I only said lightly :

‘That would be too absurd ; really, Blanche, you have a vivid imagination ! I ought to be

flattered, but my next conquest, at that rate, may be Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper, or perhaps the scullery maid, whatever her name is.' So I left Blanche to her reflections.

A week later.

When the day came I was careful to have placed on Blanche's table a large photograph of myself in a massive oxidized silver frame, with a slip of paper that only said: 'DEAR BLANCHE,—Need I assure you of my love and best wishes? This is what I was arranging with Lisette the other day, and I am only sorry, for the sake of winding up the incident properly, that the portrait of my unworthy self was not taken in a "detective camera." Ever your own, BERTIE.'

I have had Simpson here again. He is really becoming a nuisance, but I think I have scotched him for a considerable time. He came in wearing a surly, discontented

expression, like the proverbial bear with a sore head, and flung himself into a chair. Then he growled out :

‘I am sick at heart amongst all this lying and deceit. One says one thing, and another the other. How am I to get at the truth ?’

I thought he was making himself rather too much at home, and I tried to fix him with my eye, but he evaded it uneasily ; so I said coldly and pointedly :

‘Mr. Simpson, perhaps you will have the goodness to explain what you mean, and that immediately, unless you wish me to ring for you to be shown out.’

‘I’ll put it straight,’ he answered meekly. ‘I come to you as a gentleman to ask about Miss Vera. You won’t tell me much, but you say you are not married to her, as you have a wife ; but you are going to be. I go to her, and she says she is your wife, and I believe her ; and then when I come back and

see Madamzelle Lisette, as they call her, she laughs at me for a fool, and says Vera is your mistress. What am I to believe ?

I saw my opportunity, and made a bold stroke :

‘Look here, Simpson, I’ll tell you the truth once for all. I have been married to Vera all along, but I don’t want it known ; it would make a very serious difference to me indeed, if it got about ; and now I have been frank with you, I expect you to keep my secret.’

‘What about Madamzelle Lisette ?’ he asked sulkily ; ‘and you owned yourself that you had a wife living.’

‘If you are going to take the word of a servant, who knows nothing about it,’ I said with dignity, ‘in preference to mine, and also to what Vera told you herself, I have nothing more to say. If circumstances made it policy for me to keep our marriage a secret, I was

not going to blurt it out to the first man who came and asked me, and you must be a fool to think so.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Simpson humbly ; 'I believe you, and I was wrong ever to have doubted you. Still, there is Miss Haviland.'

'My good fellow,' I answered with great apparent candour, 'I have put up with a great deal more from you than I would from anyone else, for this reason : that we have both loved the same woman, and, as you are the unsuccessful one, I am sorry for you. To set your mind at rest once for all, so that you will have no need to come disturbing me again, I will explain to you that I am keeping my marriage a secret, so that I may not fall out with a very rich old relative of mine, who is all but on his death-bed, and who is bent upon my marrying well. While he thinks I am making the running with Miss Haviland, his

will remains in my favour ; if he knew Vera was my wife, he would disinherit me to-morrow. There is the whole reason for the mystery in a nutshell. If you would like this corroborated, I dare say Miss Haviland will add to her other kindnesses at my solicitation, and convince you of the truth.'

It was a game of bluff, but it succeeded perfectly. I made as though to ring the bell to send for Blanche, but this tissue of bare-faced lies had done its work, and he hurriedly interposed :

'Stop, sir, don't trouble her, please ; I see now what a fool I've been, and I heartily beg your pardon.'

The cure was complete, especially as Simpson did not care about Blanche, and I knew that when I suggested the interview.

But the effect now driven home must be clinched, and I said :

‘I grant it you freely on two conditions : I have told you everything, as I believe you to be a man of honour, and incapable of a mean action. Now you must promise, first, not to let a word of all this pass your lips, as it would do me irreparable damage ; and secondly, shake hands, and say you will be a man, and give up these useless regrets about my wife. They are very foolish, and you can’t waste your life in such a fashion.’

‘I promise you faithfully not to breathe a word of it,’ said Simpson.

‘Not even to Lisette,’ I interpolated ; ‘she is an empty-headed little thing, and her tongue runs away with her.’

‘Not to anyone,’ answered Simpson bravely so far, and then with a catch in his voice, he continued : ‘As for Vera—Mrs. Clifford—I suppose I must give her up now. It is hard, but I’ll try ; and there’s my hand upon it, sir,

and I'm very sorry I ever refused to take yours.'

'Never mind that now,' I replied magnanimously, 'and take my advice : go and look after your farm ; there is nothing like hard work for driving painful thoughts out of one's head.'

And so I got rid of him, and congratulated myself on a good half-hour's work. Some high-minded idiot has laid down the law, '*Bon sang ne peut mentir*' ; and although I flatter myself that the crimson liquid that flows in my veins is as good and as blue as that in the circulatory system of the titled descendants of the illegitimate offspring of kingly debauchees, yet I find it often very necessary to pervert the truth, not merely to the extent of that venial offence, a white lie or tarradiddle, but to tell a real unadulterated, thumping lie.

The maxim that the end justifies the means

is condemned by everyone, I believe, except the Jesuits; but am I to have all my plans spoilt, all my schemes upset, and a final rupture with Blanche, whose feelings I can consider when it suits me, just for the sake of a strict adherence to truth? Lisette has stirred up that blundering Simpson; I must fight her with her own weapons—craft and deceit.

CHAPTER XXI.

My chambers, the Temple.

It really seemed as if Lisette's wild threats were going to be carried out. I plumed myself on my management of affairs with Simpson, and arose next day with a sense of relief to think I had surmounted some of my difficulties. But my serenity was short-lived.

A telegram was put into my hands in the course of the morning. It was marvellously brief for a woman to have indited, and ran as follows :

‘Boanerges back. Have written to your chambers. Must see you there. Delay dangerous.

‘GLADYS.’

Quite long enough to disturb my equanimity, but, husband or no husband, I would not have her. Boanerges come to life again was a staggerer of itself, and what the devil—there! I meant to try and keep unparliamentary language out of these pages, but I said it at the time and felt relieved—could Mrs. Nelson want with me? Surely Mr. Nelson could not have discovered his wife's unfaithfulness, and be on my track! What did it mean? Upon my soul, if life was going to be all like this, I should retire to La Trappe, or some similar retreat, where women cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

I hied me to town, excusing myself to Blanche on the plea of my old chum Meredith's illness, for I was certainly not going to rake up the old muddy story again, which I had thought was completely ended.

On the way, when nearing London, I

bought an evening paper, and I had hardly opened its flimsy sheets when my eye caught sight of the following intelligence, surmounted in large type by the words :

‘ SAFETY OF MR. NELSON,
THE MARTYR MISSIONARY.
REVOLTING TORTURES.
FULL DETAILS.

‘ Our Cape Town correspondent telegraphs that the Rev. Ambrose Nelson, whose capture and supposed death occurred a few months ago, and caused the deepest concern, is alive, and has escaped from his captors, the 'Tchachatribe of Zulus. Mr. Nelson, though in good spirits mentally, has suffered sorely in body, living through the most terrible privations while effecting his escape, in addition to the tortures he had undergone when a prisoner. He bears with everything he has undergone like a hero, and is modestly reticent as to the

treatment he has been subjected to, with the exception of one unconcealable particular, and that is—he has been scalped. His wife and relatives have been communicated with, and after a few weeks' rest he will start for England.'

This was all the information ; then followed nearly a column of description of the 'Tchacha tribe, their customs and ceremonies, evidently culled from some book of travels. Their barbarous practices were described with a full attention to detail, to suit the morbid taste of the sensation-loving public ; and if Mr. Nelson had suffered half the tortures and mutilations that were mentioned as every-day occurrences, there would be very little of him left.

Turning the paper in search of further information, I came upon a leading article panegyricizing Mr. Nelson to the skies, and

drawing parallels between him and every noble-minded Christian from St. Paul downwards. Ministers of all denominations were exhorted to unite in an ovation of welcome, and hints were thrown out that the Royal Geographical Society would be behaving shabbily if it did not celebrate his return by a banquet.

With the modern daily paper we ought to speak of a one day's rather than a nine days' wonder. To-morrow all that space so dear to advertisers, and such a drug to editors short of intelligence, would very likely be filled with ghastly minutiae of the latest horrible murder, or the description of some classic race; while Mr. Nelson would be shunted to some obscure corner, and a few lines be all the attention his previously-honoured name would receive.

Well, each for himself, and while my mind was involuntarily belauding the Rev. Ambrose

as a hero in the abstract, the actual home-coming of the reverend gentleman in the flesh was anything but a gratification to me if proceedings were about to be instituted for a divorce. And what else could the fair Gladys want with me? I had given her to understand once for all that I could not and would not marry her when Mr. Nelson was supposed to be dead, and still less could I do so now; so the only reasons I could assign for her wishing to see me were, that someone must have learnt of her infatuation for me, and informed her of a determination to acquaint her husband with it; or, worse, was she going to confess out of revenge? She might be going to throw herself on my compassion again; but that was hardly likely, as, unless she was a second Lisette for espionage, the chances were in favour, so far as she knew, of my being married already.

I arrived at my chambers in safety, but in

perplexity of mind, which her promised letter did nothing to dispel. It only said she must see me on a matter of urgent importance to myself, and intimated her intention of calling next morning at eleven ; so after soothing my nervous system with a cigar and a drink, the composition of which Sir Wilfrid Lawson would not have approved of, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the just, quite irrespective of any title to that designation.

I had to hunt for Mrs. Nelson's letter. It was buried amongst piles of bills and billets-doux, some of the latter curiosities in the way of orthography and penmanship, bewailing my absence, and notifying me of changes from St. John's Wood to Chelsea, from Bloomsbury to South Belgravia.

I was up betimes in the morning, prepared for anything, and not the less so that I knew Boanerges was a long way off ; for Mr. Nelson is, or was, a muscular Christian, and some time

or other it might occur to him that it was his mission to slay the evil-doer, and the life I lead is not calculated to keep one in training.

My friend Meredith really was ill, and I popped in to see him. When I returned, Mrs. Nelson had arrived, and installed herself in a chair in as effective and interesting an attitude as she could accomplish, which was saying something, for she was a very fair *poseuse*.

It was some time since I had seen her, and I had to confess she was very charming—to look at. A little paler and more refined-looking, dressed in half-mourning, cunningly and yet modestly devised, she looked a picture of subdued coquettish resignation, and that is the only description I can find to express my meaning.

I could not forget all her violence and tragedy at Woodsleigh, but I might as well be polite and hear what she had to say; so we shook hands mechanically, and as calmly as if

we had seen one another the previous day; yet there was a subtle feeling about the greeting like the grasp of two prize-fighters about to measure strength.

The custom is essentially English. When Stanley found Livingstone, I suppose he only gazed on him fixedly, and then grasped his hand, instead of throwing himself effusively into the other's arms like a Frenchman would have done. He did so far bear in mind his American experience as to say in effect, 'Let's liquor up'; but after all the perils and privations he had undergone, and the long separation from everything and everybody European that Livingstone had endured, surely they might have been a little more demonstrative.

Mais revenons à nos moutons. Mrs. Nelson opened fire in a low, grave voice.

'You will have seen, Mr. Clifford, that my husband has come to life, as it were; that he

has escaped from the very jaws of death, and will in a short time be on his way to England.'

I bowed acquiescence without speaking, and she continued :

' You caused me to lose my peace of mind, my honour—I have come to you for advice as to what I had better do.'

' You are welcome to it, Mrs. Nelson,' I answered significantly ; ' and was good advice ever easier to give ? Of course you are delighted with the tidings, and are counting the hours until Mr. Nelson can return to you.'

She made a violent gesture of dissent that completely spoilt her demure air, and with a short, hard laugh said :

' I am doing nothing of the sort, and no one ought to know it better than you. Wicked as you may think it, I almost rejoiced at his death, for when I lost you at

Natal my whole heart went with you ; and that, and the thought of my own sin and unworthiness, separated me wider from my husband every day. He was so good that by the side of his extraordinary virtues what a lost, fallen creature I was ! He is coming back now, and the idea of returning to him as his wife fills me with loathing and disgust.'

' But, dear Mrs. Nelson,' I interposed, with diplomatic hypocrisy, 'you yourself supply the strongest argument in favour of taking my advice. The constant companionship of such a good man is the very thing to lead you back into the paths of peace and heal your wounded self-respect. Think, too, of the unhappy Mr. Nelson returning home, wistfully longing to see his loving wife, and finding, after all his sufferings, that the world honours and respects him, and only his wife out of them all has been faithless and deserted him.'

Mrs. Nelson knew me too well to take in all this as I intended, and she said impatiently :

‘Of course I expected you would advise me to go back to Ambrose ; but I never thought I should hear such a piece of cant from you, of all people ! Please don’t attempt the sanctimonious with me.’

I rallied, and answered cheerfully :

‘Of course, if you wish me to be frank, I will do my best. The obvious course is for you to go back to Mr. Nelson ; you loved him once, he cannot be so repulsive now.’

She interposed :

‘But he is to me ; and, fancy—you must have read of it—he has been scalped, and I don’t know how else mutilated. He may be tattooed all over, perhaps.’

‘Which will make him all the more celebrated,’ I answered ; ‘and you, as his wife,

will participate in the honour, and shine in all his reflected glory.'

'Bosh !' she replied rudely ; ' I did not come here to be trifled with.'

' Perhaps you will kindly enlighten me,' I said smoothly, ' as to what you have come for. You said something about advice ; but as you have rejected all I offered you almost before I had well finished speaking, I am a little in the dark.'

' You should not tease me,' she said, looking at me appealingly ; ' I have trouble enough already. I came for assistance, to beg your help on my knees if necessary ; and to be met with insincerity is more than I can bear.' Here she put her handkerchief to her eyes. ' Unhappy woman that I am, I sacrificed everything for love of you. Is that no claim on your consideration, no passport to your kindness ?'

Sobs pianissimo.

‘My dear Mrs. Nelson,’ I exclaimed, ‘I was under the impression that we had settled this question before. I can do nothing but advise you most strongly to go back to your husband, and make the best of things. There is no other course open to you.’

‘But I cannot, I will not, I tell you!’ she replied passionately; ‘you are heartless, or you would feel for me. Am I to have the living image of my shame always before my eyes to remind me what a vile creature I am? Can I live on, always thinking hungrily of your love, and still having to tie myself down to the dreary routine of Ambrose’s daily life, and appear interested in this good work and that point of doctrine, while I know a devil possesses me? Shame on you! have you no pity for the woman whose happiness you have ruined?’

‘I sympathize with you,’ I said to calm her; ‘but it cannot alter things. You came

to me under other circumstances, with substantially the same request—that I should marry you, as I take it you wish me to do now, after Mr. Nelson has got a divorce from you.’

‘I would not trouble with that,’ she murmured pleadingly, ‘if you would only take me—anything to get away from him, and to be with you.’

‘I can but answer you as I did before. It was out of the question then ; it is still more so now——’

‘Why?’ she interrupted pointedly ; ‘are you married?’

‘That,’ I answered pleasantly, ‘can hardly concern Mrs. Nelson.’

‘Who has been able to find out for herself,’ she replied, with a shade of triumph, holding up a letter of Vera’s, which I had carelessly left lying about. ‘I am sorry to have been guilty of reading this, but I was anxious to

find out the truth, and this is a letter from your wife. No woman less than that would have written it.'

'You are at liberty to draw what conclusions you like,' I answered carelessly ; 'it matters nothing in any case.'

'I may be able to alter your opinion,' she said threateningly. 'Supposing you refuse to help me in any way, and I go to the writer of this letter and tell her my story, will that make no difference to you ?'

'Hardly any,' I answered tranquilly. 'No man would come out very well if brought face to face with all his past sins, and all that has been forgiven and forgotten long since ; while you would hardly care for Mr. Nelson to hear your story, and how cleverly you deceived him on board the steamer.'

'No, indeed !' she exclaimed, with a shudder at the thought of her own duplicity.

Mrs. Nelson's one redeeming feature

was her respect for her husband and his opinion.

‘Well,’ I said slowly, ‘if you told the writer of that letter all about our connection, if you told everyone I know, it would make but little difference to me, and not benefit you in the slightest; while some disinterested friend *might*—I do not say would, but might inform Mr. Nelson of your treachery to him, and then where would you be? I should say defeated and disgraced, but I am diffident about offering my opinion.’

‘Stay’—a thought struck her—‘you were engaged to Miss Haviland.’

‘You have already told her,’ I said; ‘and I hope you derived all the satisfaction you expected.’

‘No; but if you are engaged still, it might interest her to know about “Vera.”’

‘My good soul,’ I said pityingly, ‘we do not commit bigamy nowadays. All the

women in the world are not worth six months' imprisonment. You may be very sure that, as I am married to one of your sex, I am not likely to be engaged to another.'

This seemed to convince Mrs. Nelson, for she remained silent for a few moments, and then said :

'Fool that I was ! I told Miss Haviland everything. Can I trust her ?'

'I don't like strong language,' I answered meekly, 'and I have no wish to be rude ; but you have my heartfelt approval of that first sentiment. If you had not been the fool you were, I might have been married by now to Blanche Haviland. I owe you one for that, but I am of a forgiving disposition. Miss Haviland has not forgiven me, though, I can tell you ; but, still, if I use my influence, I dare say I can persuade her to keep the secret for the sake of our old associations.'

'That won't do,' Mrs. Nelson replied im-

periously ; ' I must see her myself, or I can never feel safe.'

Now, this was, of all things, what I wanted to avoid—a meeting between these two, and possible revelations about Vera ; but I dared not say anything, for fear of arousing Mrs. Nelson's suspicions, so I only remarked in a casual sort of way :

' I would recommend you to stick to the point if you do. Don't say much about me, for Miss Haviland's temper does not improve with age and disappointment ; and when I meet her, she has an unpleasant habit of reminding me of your infamy, as she styles it, so look penitent, and leave me out of the question as much as you can, if you want to gain your point and don't want some lady-like abuse.'

' Oh yes,' she answered carelessly, in a way that augured ill for my hopes ; ' what does it matter ?'

‘Well, it will matter a good deal,’ I said significantly. ‘If you want to be taken back to Boanerges’ bosom, you had better stroke Miss Haviland’s plumage the right way. I presume you have resigned yourself to that hard fate?’

‘I can always put an end to myself,’ she answered recklessly; ‘the prospect is almost unbearable!’

‘Nonsense!’ I replied soothingly; ‘you consoled yourself very well once. What is to prevent your doing so again?’

‘I don’t think,’ she said with a look of horror, ‘I ever fathomed your baseness before. You advise me to go back to my husband, and coolly suggest I should sin against him again. As if I had not suffered remorse enough already!’

‘Please yourself,’ I responded amiably; ‘you were ready enough just now to relapse into sin if I would have given you the opportunity.’

‘ You monster ! you villain ! ’ was the encouraging response ; and, with sundry other uncomplimentary expressions, she took her departure, utterly ignoring my anxious request that she would write and let me know how Boanerges looked without his scalp.

Woman, thy name is inconsistency ! When Mrs. Nelson was beaten in the argument, and I had given her the advice she professed to be so ardently anxious for, then she showered abuse on me. And so it is in nine cases out of ten.

How idiotic of me to leave Vera’s letter about ! However, I flatter myself I rather hoodwinked her about Blanche ; and she has so thoroughly made up her mind that I am married to Vera, that she will never consider the possibility of an understanding between myself and Blanche, or, by Jove ! wouldn’t she take a pleasure in squelching it !

Now, if I write a diplomatic note to Blanche, all may yet be well.

‘ MY DEAR BLANCHE,

‘ I am very sorry to have to allude to something unpleasant, but Mrs. Nelson has been to see me in great trouble. You will, of course, have read of Mr. Nelson’s surprising escape, and the poor woman feels her position keenly. She is anxious to make all the amends in her power, but she fears you may use your knowledge, and she cannot go back to her husband without knowing from your own lips that you will keep secret the ill-advised confession she made to you.

‘ I have assured her of the nobility of your character, and I do beg of you, regretting my own share as deeply as I do, that you will grant her request, alluding to the past as little as possible; and, if I might ask it as a personal favour to myself, that you would

be as considerate to her as you can. I know I can rely upon your unvarying kindness, and your goodness will prompt you to inflict as little pain as possible.

‘I cannot write my feelings, or send the messages I should like to, as I am just now so bitterly reminded of the time when I enjoyed your love—that boon which I should prize above everything now.

‘Ever, dearest Blanche,

‘Your affectionate but unworthy

‘BERTIE.’

How's that for high? I think the last paragraph will gild the pill, for Blanche is thankful for small mercies ; and after my description of Mrs. Nelson as the penitent sinner, she can hardly do anything worse than preach a little homily, assure her of secrecy, and send her away reassured. If Mrs. Nelson could read the letter, I have a

conviction that her face would be worth seeing ; and I think I shall keep away from Woodsleigh for a few days, in case there should be a row royal, for my presence would not mend matters at all.

There is nothing like shirking disagreeable scenes when you can do no possible good, and when all your friends are going indiscriminately to empty the vials of their wrath on your head into the bargain. If anything awkward should transpire, let them fight it out amongst themselves, while I move Vera out of reach of feminine vituperation and ladylike blackguardism.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Temple, a few days afterwards.

HAVING arranged everything to the best of my ability, I calmly awaited the issue, and in the meantime proceeded to enjoy myself in the manner peculiar to bachelors in London ; and so successfully have I filled up the time, that these pages have been neglected up to now.

There is little for a Don Juan to put on record except another facile conquest that made me laugh heartily : A little party up the river with some friends, and a girl whose acquaintance I had made only two days before. A half-confession of love for her on

my part, with murmured regrets that I was not free, and talk of what might have been, and a hint that I should like to know if she would have cared for me under happier circumstances. Melting moments and kisses in the moonlight ensued, and we were getting on splendidly, when, as usual, someone broke the spell.

We had another *tête-à-tête* on the way home, and when the fair one said she must confide in me, I had been so kind, and tell me a secret, and she coolly informed me that she was secretly married, my sense of the ludicrous became so strong that I nearly laughed in her face.

Poor Minnie, that was her name, had found out her mistake already, and could see nothing amusing about it, for the time was drawing near when she must reveal her marriage for the strongest of reasons ; but I felt so completely taken in and routed with my own

weapons, that I enjoyed the joke for a whole day afterwards.

I had a loving letter from Vera, which came like a lightning-flash and made my own unfaithfulness to her stand out clearly and sharply like a reproach amongst my gaiety and excitement ; but boon companions, plenty of occupation, and champagne will still anything not very active at the best of times in the shape of a conscience.

Blanche wrote too : the coast is clear, and I am preparing to go back to Woodsleigh, and endeavouring to induce a pair of dissipated, fishy-looking eyes to assume their normal appearance. Late nights, or rather the 'wee sma' hours ayont the twal', much tobacco, and an inveterate adherence to 'the boy' at all times and seasons, have done their usual work ; and I shall have a difficulty in persuading Blanche that my sallow looks and tremulous hands are the result of sitting up

with my sick friend. Dissipation has its disadvantages, and no slight ones either.

Blanche says the Fawcetts are not going away, and they press her to stay longer ; but that, she adds, depends upon me, for, with wonderful consideration, she fears I may be tired of Woodsleigh, where I am always to consider myself at home, and she quotes Mrs. Fawcett : 'in fact, we look on you two as quite belonging to the family.'

She goes on to say that Mrs. Nelson has been, and that she had a great repugnance to seeing her at all ; but as I had begged it, she did so, and tried to carry out my wishes. As far as I can judge, I have been exceptionally fortunate, for there is no mention of Vera, and any revelations about her would most infallibly have had prominence.

So far so good. Mrs. Nelson pacified, or at least driven by self-interest to silence, and Matthew Simpson blindly believing in

everything I have told him. There only remains Lisette, and what move that tiger-cat may take it into her head to make next is a matter of delicious uncertainty. If I could only have got rid of her! But any active steps to dislodge her would result in disclosures that would put an end to everything with Blanche ; and yet, if I am to carry out my plans and marry her, and Lisette, with her absurd jealousy, says I shall not, what am I to do ? It is humiliating to be dictated to by a servant, but there are times when you cannot help yourself. I might try the experiment of removing Vera to London, and surely it might be done without Lisette's cognizance ; but if I did so, and said we had parted for ever, the confession of our liaison would be fatal to my hopes, and, moreover, that it was put an end to would be very difficult to prove.

If I had not promised Vera, I might have tried to get the upper hand of Lisette by

tempting her with a similar arrangement ; but she is wise as any serpent, and, in spite of her love for me, would see through my plans and laugh in my face at the offer. Besides, she could never be trusted, and if left alone to hug her jealousy like Vera, she would be flying to Woodsleigh and tearing me out of Blanche's arms. I wish I could get her out of the way ; to have all my schemes thwarted, all my plots foiled by this wretched little *intrigante* is too bad.

Well, sufficient for the day is the evil thereof, and I can go down to Woodsleigh to-morrow comparatively tranquil, while my beverage to-night will have to be hock and seltzer, with more of the latter than I care about ; but the change from bachelor freedom will be hateful, especially as I shall have to make up my mind to the inevitable. Really, if I can persuade Blanche to marry me, I must get rid of Lisette somehow, for she would be

a perpetual reminder and a Damocletian sword.

Woodsleigh Towers.

I am back again. Everyone welcomed me warmly, and Blanche came out of her shell to an unusual extent. I know she loves me, and I often feel sorry when I think what an unworthy wretch she has fixed her affections on. She said to me, almost an echo of Vera's regrets : 'I don't like you to go away from me, Bertie ; I fear sometimes you may never come back.' And she little knows how near the truth she is, for if there were any other alternative, I should be strongly tempted never to return. And yet the fates are stronger than I, and I owe her so much I am compelled to admire and respect her. Her goodness to me, after everything that has happened, is a proof of her innate nobility. If she would only come down from her pedestal, and be a

little more human, a little less perfect, I could really be fond of her.

Blanche told me about her interview with Mrs. Nelson :

‘ I was prepared to be a little sorry for her, and a little moved by her repentance ; but she didn’t behave at all like your letter gave me the impression she would. I recommended her to confess everything to Mr. Nelson, and seek his forgiveness ; but she rejected my advice scornfully. She was reserved and repellent, and seemed to demand my secrecy rather as a right than a favour. I could not help telling her what a disgraceful business altogether I thought it, but that for your sake I would promise to keep silence as long as she did the same. She did not exhibit the slightest gratitude, and I was heartily thankful when she had gone. Had she shown any contrition, the case might have been different, and I might have sympathized with her self-

abasement ; but, shameless as she appeared, I could hardly remain in the same room with her. I hope I am not unjust, but my whole nature revolted against her.'

'You are the best of women,' I answered in impassioned tones, 'and the dear, kind Blanche you have always been to me!'

I knew Mrs. Nelson's frame of mind far better than to suppose she was going to play the Magdalen, and if Blanche had only known the fire that raged in that bosom, it would have been a surprise for her.

'And, Bertie dear, now we have got over that, let us forget it, and start afresh from to-day. You will not wound me again like that, I am sure.'

'No, Blanche dear,' I answered uneasily, as I thought of Vera and Lisette, 'not willingly; but the worst of it is, a man never knows when his past sins may rise up in judgment against him.'

‘Indeed!’ she said, drawing herself up coldly. ‘Do you anticipate anything similar occurring again? Because, if so, I shall be glad if you will arrange for the *éclaircissement* to take place anywhere but here. I have had quite enough to do with that sort of people.’

‘Oh no,’ I replied hurriedly, ‘certainly not. I was only speaking generally, for however sincerely we may regret the sins we have committed, we can never be sure that we have heard the last of them. The consequences of them always remain. For instance, before this miserable affair I was happy in your love and esteem; now I feel I have sinned beyond redemption, and I can never hope to win them again; indeed, I ought to think myself fortunate—very fortunate—that you are so good to me.’

‘Don’t speak so hopelessly, dear,’ Blanche replied; ‘you know I have forgiven you long since. And although your sin with Mrs.

Nelson was a fearful blow to me, I have endeavoured to make allowances for you, as she was a bad, designing woman. And, Bertie,' she continued, faltering strangely for her, 'you have never asked me for my love. One's heart is not always in one's own keeping, and if I thought you loved me——'

Now or never—I cannot allow her to humiliate herself much further ; so, throwing myself on my knees, I kissed her hand passionately, and exclaimed in tones of rapture :

'Blanche dearest, then there is a little hope for me ?'

'Yes,' she whispered faintly, and looked as uncomfortable as her statuesque dignity would allow.

I knew what she wanted, but I was going to play my fish a little while, and I said reverently as any devotee at his shrine :

'I kneel at your feet, the most unworthy of supplicants, and I feel bitterly all the pain

I have caused you ; yet if I could but think you cared for me a little—that I was something to you—I should be the happiest of men.'

'Don't kneel to me, Bertie,' Blanche answered softly, 'but ask forgiveness from above ; you have mine already, you know, and—and if you love me, why should Mrs. Nelson and the past come between us ?'

This was the exact moment I was waiting for, and I took my cue like any *jeune premier*. I moved round to her side, and in a moment her proud head was resting on my shoulder, and she was weeping gentle tears of happiness.

'Blanche dearest, say it again. You love me in spite of everything ?' I whispered.

'I do, Bertie—I do. You nearly broke my heart, and I have been so wretched ! Don't do it again, darling, will you, for my sake ?'

And Blanche kissed me with a hungry

fervour that would have considerably astonished anyone who only saw her society demeanour.

The remainder of the scene is easily imagined. Suffice it to say that I had abundant opportunities of discovering that Blanche was only human when it came to the master passion, and she showed an *abandon* that would have been a credit to Lisette. She would have consented to anything, and if I had had the courage to confess about Vera, I believe she would have forgiven me even that, and taken me to her heart again. If I had wished it, she would have married me at once, or, I suppose I had better say, as soon as the trousseau could have been got ready ; but I by no means pressed the question, as I dreaded possible revelations.

I was thankful to get the scene over, although I loved Blanche more than I had ever done before. I knew that this temporary

softening was not likely to continue, and would probably be followed by a season of most rigid propriety, when I should have to be on my best behaviour, and be driven nearly frantic by the stiff, virtuous appearance I should have to keep up.

We arranged to stay on at Woodsleigh, because, as Blanche feelingly put it, 'they know our ways, and I can always be with you.' I did not see the advantage of that myself; but how different if it had been Vera! The idea of marriage must stand over for a time, so that I could prepare Vera and come to some understanding with Lisette.

Blanche, though treating them with kindness, looked on servants as an inferior order of created beings, and thought no more of their presence than of a favourite dog or cat. This I found out to my disgust shortly afterwards; for Lisette waited her opportunity

and pounced on me like a hawk, and I learnt that she had assisted at this interview of mine with Blanche. I was enraged, and called her a *mouchard*.

‘Yes, and if I am,’ she retorted insolently, ‘what are you? A *scelerat* that pretends love for Miss Haviland, while your mistress, Vera, pines for you at Lambton. There is not much to choose between us. *Mon Dieu!* Miss Haviland needs a spy when she has you for a lover. I heard your pretty speeches, your love-making, and I, “only Lisette,” as she calls me, could have blushed for you. Miss Haviland is a good mistress; shall I not do my duty, and tell her all?’

‘Hang your duty!’ I interrupted impatiently; ‘that troubles you a lot. If I were asking you for a kiss, how much would you think of it then?’

‘*C’est vrai,*’ she replied philosophically, and then, growing suddenly passionate, she con-

tinued : ‘ And I, who want your love, your tenderness, your embraces, how can I see even the mockery of them bestowed on Miss Haviland ? When you kiss her cold, soulless lips, that surely love’s touch should warm into life, a pain goes through my heart like a knife, as I think of the rapture that kiss would give me, and she has it.’

‘ Lisette,’ I said, trying to speak calmly, ‘ we must put an end to this nonsense. Because I gave you a few kisses in fun, I am not going to be annoyed in this way ; you shall not force your love upon me in this way—I will not have it.’

‘ Yet you held me in your arms,’ she answered, with angry reproach, ‘ and told me you loved me.’

‘ Yes, I suppose I must have done,’ I admitted unwillingly—‘ you remind me of it often enough ; but I was carried away at the moment, and I didn’t really mean it. I never

thought you would go on in this absurd fashion, or I should have said I detested you.'

'You never thought of the hopes you raised in my heart,' she said hotly; 'you never thought that I had loved you long in secret, and that your words, and you meant them then, raised in me a heaven of happiness; and now, when you tell me this, a demon of hate takes its place. Take care, Mr. Clifford: a little more, and I shall be mad with rage and despair!'

Lisette was very excited, her bosom heaving, and her breath coming in quick, short gasps. I tried to calm her:

'My good girl, listen to me. I am very sorry if I made you feel so deeply. Men are thoughtless, and at the time your beauty bewitched me, and I hardly know what I did do or say; but you must have known I never meant anything serious. A marriage

between us would have been out of the question.'

'Not so much as you think, monsieur,' answered Lisette proudly; 'the blood in my veins is as good as your own, but my family lost everything in the Terror. They were reduced to poverty, and I have been a *fille de chambre* ever since I was old enough. I saw no disgrace in earning a living to help my father, the Comte de Bellagio. Our ancestry reached back to Charlemagne, and our *château* was a palace; but, *hélas!* the *sans-culottes* destroyed everything they could not steal. I tell no one of it,' she continued—'of what use would my beggared title be in the servants' hall, where it would only be derided and laughed to scorn?—but I can trust my secret to your keeping. I am at least your equal, if not your superior'—this with an attempt at *l'air du faubourg*.

To believe that berouged little soubrette

noble required considerable imagination, but I came to the conclusion that while her story might or might not be true, it was not worth my while to dispute it, so I only said earnestly :

‘If you were the Empress Eugénie herself, it could make no difference. I can never marry anyone but Miss Haviland—I owe her too much——’

‘Too much devotion to her fortune,’ interrupted Lisette impatiently, disappointed that her grand *coup* had fallen flat ; ‘tell the truth, at least. You would marry me if I were as rich as she is.’

‘Never!’ I replied with conviction.

‘But you promised to once,’ she said, half archly.

‘There was some impossible condition, I’m sure,’ I said, ‘and I can’t be answerable for all the silly speeches I ever made to a pretty girl. Do be sensible, and cease all

this trouble you are giving me. If you loved me as much as you say you do, you would help on my marriage, instead of putting obstacles in the way.'

This weatherbeaten argument failed completely. Lisette's face darkened as I spoke, and she broke out into fierce vehemence.

'You ask me to help on your marriage with Miss Haviland, when every loving look you give her, false as it is, fills me with a transport of jealousy, every caress you imprint on her lips sets the demon raging within me, every endearing word makes me to gnash my teeth with envy and bitterness, every pressure of her hand makes me to hate her with an undying hatred, because she is buying you from me. You ask me this, and I stand here to listen ! Am I already going mad ?'

This was awful ! If Lisette had seen me and Vera love-making, I don't know what the consequences would have been. An inquest,

I imagine. And Lisette stamped and declaimed like any tragedy heroine, and I could not be rehearsing any more private theatrical scenes if anyone should chance to observe us; so I expostulated, and my language was not particularly dignified.

‘Hush, Lisette! for goodness’ sake be quiet. You needn’t make such a confounded row—someone will hear us.’

Thank heaven, Blanche’s training had used Lisette to habits of obedience, and she abandoned the melodramatic Mrs. Siddons tone. But if she had moderated the sound, the sentiments grew worse, and she hissed out her words with a vindictive ferocity that made me draw back for a moment.

‘Sooner than help you to win her, I would kill her. I will kill her if I cannot prevent you marrying her in any other way!’

‘Lisette, you are a foolish, wicked girl!’ I answered sternly. ‘If ever I hear you make a

speech like that again, I shall not study the consequences to myself, but I shall speak to Miss Haviland and have you turned out of the house. I ought to do so now, but I make allowances for your excitement.'

'And not for your own fear of discovery, oh no !' she interjected sarcastically. A very unpleasant habit of Lisette's, always going for the weak points in your armour.

'I think nothing of that,' I replied firmly ; 'when you talk in that wild, mad fashion, I should be a cur indeed to let Miss Haviland run any risk because I was afraid to speak out. Promise me never to speak or think like that again, or your opportunities for mischief at Woodsleigh will soon be over.'

'I promise,' she answered sullenly ; 'but I don't care, you shall never marry Miss Haviland.'

'I am not going to argue that point with you,' I said, trying another tack ; 'but look

here, you profess to value my love, don't you ?'

'Yes, indeed I do,' Lisette replied, melting at once : 'I would give my life for it, I would——'

'Oh, do stop !' I interrupted impatiently ; 'I don't want any more sentimental gush. If you'd do what I want you to do, I should appreciate that.'

'What can I do ?' she asked eagerly, but suspiciously.

'Leave off your irritating espionage and interference,' I replied. 'You want my love, and yet you make my life a burden to me ; and if you continue, I shall hate you : you are driving me to it very fast now.'

'If you hate me,' she answered with sublime resignation, 'I shall kill myself !'

Of course I had to reprove her for this, but I thought if she only would be so obliging, what a lot of difficulties would be removed !

I could get nothing more out of her : she relapsed into a state of sullen despair, and after her frantic outbursts of jealousy it was not the slightest use attempting to console her with an arrangement like Vera's.

It is most unsatisfactory—every adverse influence removed but one, and that the most determined and obstinate of all, and capable of any amount of mischief. Shall I confess all to Blanche, and trust to obtaining her forgiveness? It would be useless, and I should have to give up Vera, and I won't do that for any number of Lisettes ; at least, not yet : and it would be a useless sacrifice ; Blanche would never pardon that baseness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A few days afterwards.

I HAVE a wrestle with the Bramah lock of this volume, before I can get it open, and I wonder if Lisette has been exercising her ingenuity upon it. I am prepared for anything, and it will be some little revenge if she reads my opinion of her. If I had thought she would read it, I would have made it worse—that is quite a bit of ladylike spite.

Looking at the page I wrote last, I find myself bravely resolving not to give up Vera ; and it reads curiously now, for I have had a letter from her, in which she makes overtures for our separation—on strictly praiseworthy

grounds, it is true, but still, she is the first to have mentioned it. I shall be like the dog in the fable ; and grasping the shadow of Blanche, I shall lose the substance of Vera. But of that more anon, for a diary is nothing if not chronological ; and Blanche must engage my attention first, as her doings take precedence of Vera's letter—in time, at all events, if not in importance.

Blanche has improved wonderfully, and if there were no Vera, my susceptible heart could soon fancy itself in love with her. She is gentler, less imperious, likes to listen to my opinions, instead of always crushing them with her own superior wisdom, and I feel altogether more at home with her. She seems to have dropped her idea that a man should always be a pattern of propriety, and should never frivol with other girls, or enjoy himself away from her side ; she is more lovable altogether, and I am actually tempted to kiss her sometimes,

not out of malice aforethought, but impulsively and from inclination on the spur of the moment.

She condescends to take an interest in things she would have scorned as childish before, and a tender love-light shines in those once cold, steady eyes, and the tones of that clear, precise voice seem softened and mellowed ; while the frigid dignity of her erstwhile repellant demeanour has given place to a charming diffidence, a tender restraint, that is as strange as it is fascinating. I positively enjoy her society, and now and again she pets me with a shy dignity that is irresistible, if only from its novelty. Certainly, the new Blanche is a great deal nicer than the old one.

(I have just read this over, and if someone else had written it, I should say most emphatically that he was in love with Blanche; and I think I ought to know the symptoms.)

I am encouraged to suggest the day, and

although I speak of it as the topmost summit of my happiness, yet I hesitate and leave the momentous question unsettled ; for I have a vague anxiety, a dread of what Lisette may do, for she must be nearly mad with jealousy at our happiness together, and fixing the date of our marriage may only precipitate matters.

I am positively beginning to love Blanche—there, the murder's out, and I look forward to possible treachery on Lisette's part with more concern for Blanche than myself ; in fact, I could bear anything with equanimity if I could only be sure of her affection. The shock to her self-love would be dreadful, and I would do anything to save her from it ; but, I reflect sadly, it is too late now. Even if I were to give up Vera from this hour, Lisette could and would publish to the world how long and serious our liaison had been, and Blanche's high-minded nature would revolt at the deceit I have practised on her.

No, I will stand to my guns! and may perdition take Lisette, if through her instrumentality I and Blanche are parted.

What a lesson for me that all this trouble, the necessity for all this subterfuge and subjection to a mere servant, *soi-disant* comtesse as she is—all this arises from a few playful kisses, a flirtation with a pretty girl that I gave no more thought to at the time than an unpaid bill, and which is now causing me more anxiety than ever I had in my life before!

And well may I say all this; for Lisette, watchful as any cat, has detected some more of our love-making, and came to me only to-day with a burning, jealous face, her dainty features distorted with anger, and a wild, evil look in her eyes.

‘You shall not—you *shall* not marry your darling Blanche!’ she cried, in vicious, strident tones. ‘I have waited, and watched the

light in her face as you drew near, and seen your Judas-like kisses until I can endure it no longer. Don't drive me too far, or you shall repent it bitterly !'

'I am sorry for you, Lisette,' I said, in a kind, conciliating tone, for one must hold a candle to his Satanic majesty sometimes. 'But I cannot listen any more—it is no use.'

'You will not ?' she asked impatiently ; 'then it will be the worse for you. I will delay no longer, but make known to Miss Haviland your perfidy.'

I felt strongly tempted to tell her to go to the devil, but I held my peace, and after a moment's pause I answered :

'Why do you wish to injure me and earn my undying hatred ? You know that this marriage is the only thing left for me. Miss Haviland knows all, and is willing to overlook the past.'

Lisette's face fell for an instant, but any

hopes I might have had of deceiving her were quickly dispelled.

She inquired sneeringly but with surprise :

‘ All ? You have told Miss Haviland about Miss Marchmont ?’

I said : ‘ Yes, she knows everything ;’ but I fear my voice had not that ring of confidence I should like to have given it.

Lisette was staggered for a moment, but soon exclaimed :

‘ Bah ! am I a child, that I should be made sport of ? See, I go to ask her !’

She turned away quickly. It might have been only a ruse, but I could not afford to try risky experiments ; so, after letting her go a few steps, I called her back.

‘ Lisette,’ I said coldly, ‘ come back. I may as well own Miss Haviland does not know.’

I should never deserve the appellation of

splendide mendax—a magnificent liar—and her face plainly hinted her contempt for my feeble diplomacy. It is humiliating to confess ; but with the stakes I was playing for, there was no trusting to chance.

‘Do you ever tell the truth,’ Lisette said scornfully, ‘except *par hasard*? *Ma foi*! I was sure Miss Haviland knew nothing, or she would——’ and here she held her head up in imitation of Blanche’s lofty style, and swept past me with a gesture of fine disdain.

She was a capital actress—or shall I say mimic?—and the imitation was so good I could have laughed heartily, had the issue been fraught with less serious consequences.

‘You may as well go and tell her, and have done with it,’ I answered desperately, losing my temper at being foiled so easily ; ‘and then what better will you be ? Spoil the one chance I have, and how much I shall love you ! You will be turned away from here,

and if you cross my path, woman as you are, I shall make you sorry for it.'

'But if I were to show you another way,' she answered eagerly—'supposing I could make you as rich as Miss Haviland, would you marry me then?'

'Supposing I were to become Rothschild to-morrow,' I answered angrily, 'it would make no difference. What nonsense are you thinking of? If there were no Miss Haviland in existence, I should never dream of marrying you.'

A gloom settled on her countenance as I spoke, and then she answered, with sullen ferocity :

'You will not save yourself—then I will tell Miss Haviland everything. I will not see her in your arms ; if I cannot have love, I will have revenge.'

'My dear Lisette,' I expostulated, 'is there nothing I can do to induce you to be reason-

able—nothing that would satisfy you short of your wishes, which you must see I cannot accede to ?’

‘I see nothing,’ she answered fiercely, ‘except that you would bribe me with *her* money !’ with an inflection that spoke deadly hatred.

‘I did not mean that,’ I replied soothingly; ‘things might be arranged so that you could enjoy my affection——’

‘And Miss Haviland your name?’ Lisette interrupted savagely.

‘I mean,’ I continued lamely, ‘that, while I must marry her, what is there to prevent our being happy together away from her? and you know,’ I added, with a feeble attempt at jocularly, ‘stolen waters are always the sweetest.’

‘*Mille remerciements, monsieur !*’ she bowed with ironical gratitude and a very sinister menace in her voice. ‘You ask of me, la

Comtesse de Bellagio, to become a *cocotte*—your mistress *en effet*. If but my father were alive, his daughter would not be lightly insulted; and, in his name, there is your *cartel*!’

It is awkward to be struck by a woman. Lisette stepped forward, and—must I own it in these pages? but they are nothing if not truthful—boxed my ears! I remembered my promise to Vera with some little remorse; but circumstances alter cases, and if Lisette had consented to my proposals I could hardly consider her the innocent *ingénue*, the type of which Vera was so anxious to befriend. But to my firebrand.

‘You little fool,’ I said, ‘to take things *au grand sérieux*! I thought you loved me, and would make a sacrifice for my sake.’

‘Never, monsieur!’ she answered with an air of grandeur that was ludicrous. ‘And in France you should die for this, and Maître

Lachaud would justify me ! I am not sunk so low as you think.'

'No,' I reflected, 'and yet you are not very particular sometimes.'

But I said nothing of my thoughts. Her attempted old-world airs and graces amused me beyond description.

'Well, come, Lisette,' I answered ; 'I apologize sincerely. You know I forgot I was speaking to a De Bellagio.'

And, to hide my laughter, I stooped and kissed her hand with an imitation of the courtly manner you see on the stage when Offenbach and *Messager* are in possession ; and this concession to her dignity seemed to pacify her, although she still affected a stately pose with as much success as a little bantam cockerel might ape the grace of a swan.

'I thought I was talking to a gentleman,' she replied, her chirp-like voice reduced to freezing-point.

‘And I thought you loved me,’ I said, copying her manner.

There was a sudden change; her dignity vanished, and she said with emotion :

‘I do—I do! and how I suffer! You take my love, and offer me disgrace!’

A fit of crying seemed imminent, so I answered hurriedly and tenderly :

‘A thousand pardons! I never meant to hurt your feelings, especially as you say you love me.’

‘As I say I love you!’ she interrupted. ‘*Grand Dieu!* you are my very life, and you ask me to give you up to that cold, loveless Miss Haviland.’

‘There is no other alternative—I must marry her,’ I said firmly, for I hoped Lisette was yielding.

‘But there is,’ she interjected with energy, ‘if you would listen to me.’

‘No, Lisette,’ I said kindly but unmis-

takably ; ‘it can never be. There is no use in going over the same ground again. I like you very much indeed, but it is only kindness to tell you your hopes are in vain. Not only am I bound in honour to Miss Haviland, but everything else—all her goodness, her devotion, her long attachment to me—has to be considered. I can never——’

‘Which no doubt influenced you when you took Miss Marchmont to Edenford.’ Lisette had a very bad habit of interrupting me when I was getting on beautifully. Then I was favoured with a look and a gesture which I felt to mean, ‘Go on ; I know all about it. I can see through it all.’ This sort of thing damps one’s enthusiasm, and a Gladstone or a John Bright would have a difficulty in being eloquent under the circumstances.

After a pause, I said with a good deal less fervour :

‘Well, I was trying to explain what I owed

to Miss Haviland, when you interrupted me—how absolutely necessary it was that I should marry her.’

‘And half a dozen words of mine can prevent it,’ answered Lisette, with growing vindictiveness; ‘and I will prevent it!’

‘Lisette,’ I interposed appealingly, ‘if you love me, for my sake——’

‘Not for the whole world,’ she answered with the solemn resignation of despair. ‘You are everything to me. If I cannot have you, why should anyone else? That poor fool at Lambton will grieve for her sin, and give you up, I know. When I lose you, I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that Blanche Haviland, blind that she is, has rejected you—when I would cherish you, when I would be your slave in spite of everything; when, if you were the biggest scoundrel that trod this earth, I would welcome you, I would worship you, if only I knew I had your love.’

And, drawing herself up after the fashion of some Roman senator wrapping his toga around him, she stalked away unheeding my protestations.

I pause to note that I think I have described our interviews on the whole correctly, with the exception of sundry strange oaths, expressions, and interjections that Lisette employs, that would puzzle anyone less expert at slang than a Paris *gamin*. I take a melancholy pleasure in exactitude; it postpones the inevitable reflection that finesse as I may there seems no road open for me. Destruction is imminent, and I see no way of averting it. If Lisette carries out her threat, my suit is doomed. Yet there is nothing I can do but to trust to Providence and let things slide. Some cleverer man might succeed in squaring Lisette; I have tried every argument, every artifice I can think of, and all to no purpose.

I have often read books in which fiery, impulsive characters similar to hers are obliging, and are influenced by some machiavelian craft as easily as clay under the potter's hands ; but I find her intractable. Now I think of it, I could have offered to marry her as I did Vera, and then become Blanche's nominal husband ; but even if Lisette would consent to any such arrangement, its duration would most likely be about three days.

I can fly, I can kill myself, but, opposed to those, I may as well adopt a *laissez-faire* policy and drift with the stream. I cannot help myself, but something may turn up in my favour. And the worst is, I feel I love Blanche, if one can really love two people at once, and I would give anything to prevent Lisette's avowal wounding her. I might confess everything, but I know too well that cold, proud nature, in spite of her love for me, would never brook my treachery, and I should

only receive a frigid dismissal, so I may just as well risk all and fight my ship to the last.

I feel murderous towards Lisette, and if I had the power of suggestive hypnotism, she would certainly commit suicide to-night. My one great chance, my big fish that I have neglected and played with, until I know and realize its value, is on the eve of escaping me ; and all through that wretched girl, whose smiles I thought dear at a kiss or a half-sovereign, and who is likely to cost me a bigger price than any *cocotte*, cormorant as she may be, costs her last *infatué*.

And I have a haunting conviction, which no amount of Mrs. Fawcett's excellent whisky will remove, for I am risking a headache to-morrow, that Lisette means what she says, and that the crisis is approaching. Well, if I were to think and worry myself all night, it would not mend matters, so I will put

Lisette out of my head ; and if people would only bear in mind this simple remedy, what a lot of annoyance they would save themselves !

I turn to Vera's letter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

‘ Marine Villa, Lambton-on-Sea.

‘ MY DEAREST BERTIE,

‘ Your letters are always so welcome, but your last causes me the greatest pain. I know I am foolish, but how can I help myself? I have treasured the hope, in spite of everything, that you would not marry Miss Haviland, and that some day I should call you really and truly my own; and then your letter says, oh, so coldly! there is a prospect of your early marriage. Of course, I can't reproach you for that, and, dear, I don't want to repine; but my sin has indeed found me out, and my remorse is growing daily

well-nigh insupportable. I thought your love cheap at any sacrifice once, and though I love you not one atom the less now, my conscience will not be stilled, and I can never know peace while I continue in sin.

‘It is bitter grief to me to have to write like this and to contemplate parting from you, my only love ; but the long, lonely days bring me nothing but gnawing anguish when I reflect on my position, and bitterest repentance for my fault of loving you too well. When I have you with me, I am so happy that I forget everything that troubles me ; but with your departure all the light goes out of my life, and I am reduced to the most abject despair. I realize my wickedness with keenest contrition as it is, but when you tell me you are going to marry Miss Haviland, my burden becomes heavier than I can bear.

‘Don’t think me, dearest, too sensitive or over-conscientious, but in the long solitary

hours I have to spend by myself I am haunted by the most painful reflections of how I have fallen, and I lie awake at night and weep bitterly to think of my lost good name, which my conscience continues to remind me of with the maddening reiteration of the tolling of a funeral-bell. If I have to add to this the unhappy consciousness that you are married and I am sinning not only against God, but against your wife, whom I know to be everything that is good, I shall go out of my mind.

‘Dearly as I love you, my own, I cannot sink deeper into guilt ; and if you marry Miss Haviland, I must give you up, though it will break my heart. I ought never to see you again, but I do hunger for a sight of your dear face ; so come just once more, my heart’s darling, for the last time before I am plunged into despair.

‘You have always been so good and kind to

me. Will you be angry when I tell you what I feel I *must* do? Forgive me, dearest, I beg of you, for the step I am resolved on taking ; but I cannot endure the misery I do, and know as well that my soul is in peril, that I have nothing to look forward to in the next world unless I am repentant and discontinue this life.

‘There are religious houses in London where ladies are employed in visiting the sick, in succouring poverty, and other charitable works, without leading a monastic life. I shall seek out one of these, see the director, and tell him my story, concealing only the worst of it ; and perhaps some day, when I have toiled and striven my hardest to win his approval and that of my own conscience, I may confess all and trust to obtaining merciful judgment. There I shall be dead to the world and safe from temptation, though banishment from you is the bitterest drop in

my cup of punishment, and I shall never cease to think of you, darling, darling !

‘Now, Bertie dearest, I want to speak to you about the money—your money I mean ; for I have always looked on it as yours, though you told me it was settled on me, and no one could touch a penny of it. I feel sad as I write this ; I feel like a condemned convict making his will ; but I want to tell you what I have decided to do, and get all the sorrowful business over, so that when you come—and you will come, dearest, won’t you ?—we shall have nothing to mar our last short spell of happiness, except the remembrance that it will be all too short, and that our final parting is at hand.

‘I shall of course insist on your taking the money back again ; it was a part of our bargain, you know ; but I will ask you to allow me a little, just sufficient for bare subsistence, to support me until I can get into one of those

institutions I spoke of. I know you will do that, however angry you may be ; but, dearest, I am only going to do what is right. Do not attempt to turn me from my plans ; my mind is fully made up, and I shall be happier trying to do good. Darling, I can't help thanking you again and again for all your goodness and thoughtfulness for me : and I pray for your welfare as earnestly and as often as for my own.

‘ It is a hard task, hard beyond description, but I have brought myself to it, and I will wish you and Miss Haviland every happiness, and may God bless you in every way !

‘ Come on Saturday, dearest, if you can ; but you know I am always too happy to see you at any time. Oh, my love, my darling ! when I think it is for the last time. My God ! it is too cruel ; I cannot bear it !

‘ Your heart-broken

‘ VERA.’

There are evident marks of tears, a flood of them, I should say, at the end, and as I close the letter I have an uncomfortable sensation in my throat.

Time was when I would have laughed cynically as any Mephistopheles at good resolutions ; but Vera's deep feeling affects me, and I repent of my conquest. Of course I shall have to let the poor little woman do as she wishes, I should be a perfect fiend to prolong her tortures ; and now I love Blanche, I cannot find it in my heart to try and thwart Vera : the reflections of anyone in her position must be galling.

But stay, if our liaison is to be broken off, have I not a countermine to Lisette ? Can I quiet her for a time, temporize, promise her anything, and in the meantime say good-bye to Vera—and I shall feel that keenly—then choose a time when Blanche is especially tender and yielding, work on her feelings and

confess by degrees? Surely Blanche, woman-like, will forgive me anything before marriage, if I only appear sufficiently penitent and anxious for pardon and love. She has shown herself so affectionate and pliant of late, it is hard if I cannot contrive to persuade her I was the victim of circumstances, and that she has had my inalienable devotion all the while.

That, and abject contrition and a little abuse of Vera, ought to make matters all right. Of course I shall be fearfully lectured, and have to endure a tremendous amount of blame and censure ; but then, the prize is worth suffering for, and if the *affaire* Vera is actually at an end, and I can prove it by her letters, and by her having become a sister of mercy, and the confession comes from me, there may be hope yet.

But, who knows? it may be too late already ! Lisette is impulsive ; she threatened to act, and

perhaps Blanche may be listening to the whole story at this moment. But no, she would not do that without sending for me to face the accuser. Can I see Lisette in time to prevent her speaking? It is difficult to say, but I will promise anything, and even offer her marriage, though that may lead to complications later.

Can I send a note to Lisette to-night? No, it is half-past two, and probably *la comtesse* sleeps; for Blanche is not one to keep up servants to talk gossip and bear with petulance.

I wonder if I can get up early for once in a way and catch Lisette. I will make her happy *pro tem.*, if she knifes me for it afterwards; for after all the trouble she has given me, I will not be particular about her feelings. Perhaps I shall be too late, the mischief may be done: I feel something akin to a presenti-

ment, a gloomy foreboding that can never be the result of first-rate Glenlivet.

So heigho for bed, and the war-path in the morning !

END OF VOL. II.

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